



DANIEL MORGAN

Fighting Frontiersman



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FORGOTTEN HEROES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Nathanael Greene: The General Who Saved the Revolution

Henry Knox: Washington's Artilleryman

Francis Marion: Swamp Fox of South Carolina

Daniel Morgan: Fighting Frontiersman

John Stark: Live Free or Die

Jim Gallagher



DEDICATION: To my son, Dillon.

Frontispiece: Daniel Morgan and other American officers observe the British surrender at Saratoga. Morgan played a key leadership role during the 1777 Saratoga campaign, and the American victory helped turn the tide of the war in the Patriots' favor.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Why Daniel Morgan Should Be Remembered.....	6
1 Showdown at Cowpens	8
2 Life on the Frontier	14
3 Morgan the Rifleman.....	24
4 Victory at Saratoga	36
5 Success and Frustration	50
6 Turning Point in the South	61
7 Final Years	73
Chronology	80
Glossary	82
Further Reading	84
Internet Resources.....	85
Index	86

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Why Daniel Morgan Should Be Remembered

“Morgan, you have done wonders this day. You have immortalized yourself and honored your country.”

—General Horatio Gates, after the battle of Saratoga

“Sir, you command the finest regiment in the world.”

—General John Burgoyne, during the surrender at Saratoga, October 19, 1777

“The enemy had with their army great numbers of marksmen, armed with rifle-barreled pieces. These, during an engagement, hovered upon the flanks in small detachments, and were very expert in securing themselves, and in shifting their ground. In this action [September 19], many placed themselves in high trees, in the rear of their own line; and there was seldom a minute’s interval of smoke in any part of our line, without officers being taken off by single shot.”

—Burgoyne, on Morgan’s corps, in his report to Parliament on Saratoga

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to have you with me. The people of this country adore you. Had you been with me a few weeks past, you would have had it in your power to give the world the pleasure of reading a second Cowpens affair. . . . Great generals are scarce—there are few Morgans to be found.”

—General Nathanael Greene, letter to Daniel Morgan, August 26, 1781

“I have a great regard for Genl. Morgan, and respect his military talents; am persuaded, if a fit occasion should occur no one would exert them with more zeal in the service of his country than he would.”

—George Washington, letter to Colonel Charles M. Thruston, 1794

“Patriotism and valor were the prominent features of his character; and the honorable services he rendered to his country during the Revolutionary War crowned him with glory and will remain in the breasts of his countrymen a Perpetual Monument to his Memory.”

—Epitaph on Daniel Morgan’s grave, 1802

“His courage was of a peculiar quality. . . . When beyond the reach of danger . . . he was accustomed to admit his sensibility to the impressions of fear. Just previous to some of the most glorious occasions of his life, those feelings are said by himself to have come upon him like an apparition, shaking for a moment his inmost soul. But at the crisis of battle most trying to human fortitude, when death presented itself on every side, and danger flew thickly around, no such weakness ever exhibited.”

—James Graham, Morgan’s first biographer, in *The Life of General Daniel Morgan* (1856)

“From Bunker Hill to Quebec, through Burgoyne’s campaign, and wherever he was entrusted with command, he had proved his courage and his fertility in resources during periods of great danger; and Congress vied with States and citizens, in honorable testimonials to his valor, as the victor at Cowpens.”

—Col. Henry B. Carrington, in *Battles of the American Revolution, 1775–1781* (1877)

“Morgan, by virtue of his strong personality and commanding presence, could mix freely with his soldiers and acquire their good will without losing their respect. A contemporary wrote that no officer ‘knew better how to gain the love and esteem of his men.’”

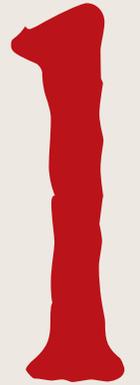
—Don Higginbotham, in *Daniel Morgan: Revolutionary Rifleman* (1961)

“Brigadier General Daniel Morgan of the Virginia Line was by far the Continental Army’s finest battle captain. If one were to judge him by all who have led Americans into battle, he would have no superiors and few peers.”

—John Buchanan, in *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas* (1997)



The gently sloping field where Daniel Morgan decided to make a stand against a pursuing British army, known as Cowpens, probably looked something like this on the evening of January 16, 1781. Though General Morgan (opposite) was respected as a battlefield tactician, he faced a stiff challenge at Cowpens.



SHOWDOWN AT COWPENS

As afternoon faded into evening on January 16, 1781, hundreds of weary men trudged into a grassy, open area near Thicketty Creek, South Carolina. These American soldiers had been on the move all day, trying to elude a pursuing British army. Their commander, Brigadier General Daniel Morgan, had been trying to avoid a battle. Morgan knew that if his outnumbered men were defeated, American hopes for independence might come to an end.

The American Revolution was entering its seventh year, and many people were tired of the war. In the northern colonies British and *Patriot* forces were at a *stalemate*, but in the South the British had won a series of victories during 1779 and 1780 and seemed to be regaining control. America's ally France was growing reluctant to waste more soldiers or supplies on what appeared to be a lost cause. The French foreign minister, Comte de Vergennes, had even suggested a peace agreement in which Britain would keep the southern colonies and New York, while Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and a few other colonies would become independent. Although Patriot leaders did not like this plan, they knew that another major American defeat in the South would force them to accept the French proposal.

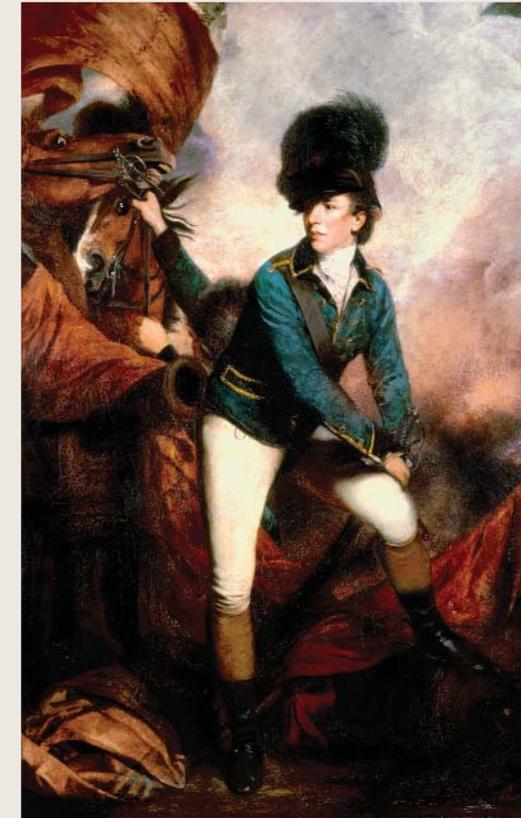
CHOOSING THE BATTLEGROUND

By the evening of January 16, Morgan knew his men would have to fight. The British were only a few miles away, and his men were worn out. After carefully scouting the area, he decided his small army of about 1,000 men would offer battle in a grassy pasture that local farmers called Cowpens. Morgan's aide, Captain Dennis Trammell, later recalled that as the general looked out over the terrain, he commented, "Captain, here is Morgan's grave or victory."

Victory would not be easy. The British commander was Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, a cunning and ruthless

young officer who had become one of the most hated and feared men in the South. Tarleton's force included about 500 members of the British Legion, a crack force of well-trained infantry soldiers and horsemen, along with another 700 British regulars. Also, the terrain at Cowpens did not seem ideal for the Americans. There were no swamps or thick forests that would prevent Tarleton's horsemen from charging into the American lines. The field was so wide that the British infantry might be able to *outflank* the Patriots. Finally, if the fight went badly an American retreat would be blocked by the nearby Broad River, which had been flooded by recent rains. It would be nearly impossible for Morgan's army to escape annihilation by fleeing across the swollen river.

The Americans were anxious to fight, though, and they trusted their commander's judgment. Morgan had won decisive victories in some of the most crucial battles of the Revolution. The



Colonel Banastre Tarleton, wearing the green coat of the British Legion, reaches for his sword in this dashing portrait. Under Tarleton, the Legion had routed Continental soldiers and Patriot militias during several encounters in South Carolina in 1780.

tall, solidly built general had a reputation for toughness and bravery, as well as an excellent grasp of battlefield *tactics*. He had developed a special plan for the battle, and he believed his soldiers could carry it out.

First, though, he wanted his tired men to eat and rest. Cowpens was a place where local farmers let their cattle graze before taking them to market, and there was a herd in the open fields. Morgan ordered the soldiers to butcher some of the animals and roast the meat for supper. While darkness fell and the soldiers ate, Morgan explained his battle plan to his officers. After this, the general wandered through the American camp, stopping to visit the small groups of soldiers gathered around flickering campfires.

EXPLAINING THE PLAN

Nearly all of the American soldiers respected Morgan. Unlike most other Continental Army officers, who came from wealthy and privileged backgrounds, Morgan owned a small farm and had once been a wagon driver on the frontier. He had never lost his connection to the regular soldiers, sharing their hardships in the field and worrying about their problems and fears. On the night of January 16, Morgan carefully explained to his men what they would have to do to defeat the British the next morning.

Morgan spent most of his time speaking to the *militia* that accompanied his force. All Continental officers knew

that these untrained, inexperienced volunteer soldiers often ran away when facing a British bayonet charge. However, the militia had an essential role to play in Morgan's battle plan. The men responded eagerly to the commander's confidence. "It was upon this occasion that I was more perfectly convinced of General Morgan's qualifications to command militia, than I had ever before been," commented Thomas Young, a militia major from South Carolina.

The evening previous to the battle, he went among the volunteers, helped them fix their swords, joked with them about their sweet-hearts, told them to keep in good spirits, and the day would be ours. And long after I laid down, he was going about among the soldiers, encouraging them, and telling them that the "Old Wagoner" would crack his whip over Ben [Tarleton] in the morning, as sure as he lived. "Just hold up your heads, boys," he would say, "three fires, and you are free! And then when you return to your homes, how the old folks will bless you, and the girls kiss you, for your gallant conduct!" I don't believe he slept a wink that night.

Morgan was not the only person keeping late hours. Tarleton knew the Americans were near, so he drove his exhausted men through the night to reach them. At dawn on the chilly morning of January 17, 1781, the British marched up the road to Cowpens. They found Morgan's men in the field and ready to fight. Shouting their battle cry, the British soldiers lowered their bayonets and charged through the damp grass toward the American lines.

- American Revolution
 causes of the, 24, 26
 France enters the, 48, 52
 Great Britain surrenders, 74–75
See also Great Britain; individual
 battle names
- Anburey, Thomas, 43–44
- Arnold, Benedict, 40, 42–43, 44,
 46–48, 49
 and the invasion of Canada, 28–32
- Battle of Bemis Heights, 44–49
- Battle of Cowpens, 8–13, 66–72
- Battle of Freeman's Farm, 42–44, **45**
- Battle of Monmouth, 53–55
- Bemis Heights, 41–49
- Braddock, Edward, 15, 16–18
- Buchanan, John, 7
- Burgoyne, John, 6, 36–37, 39–48
 surrender of, at Saratoga, 48–49
- Burwell, Nathaniel, 75
- Burwell, Robert, 15
- Camden, S.C., 60–61
- Canada, 16, 28–35
- Carrington, Henry B., 7
- Charleston, S.C., 58–59, 63
- Chief Pontiac's War, 21
- Clinton, Henry, 44, 48, 52–53, 58–59
- Collins, James, 70
- Continental Army, 26, **43**, 48, 60
 at Camden, S.C., 60–61
 methods of promotion within, 56
 tactics of, 36–37
 at Valley Forge, 50–53
- Continental Congress, 24, 26
- Cornwallis, Charles, **58**, 59, 60, 62–63,
 65–66, 71–72
- Curry, Abigail (Mrs. Daniel Morgan),
 21, 57
- Dunmore (Lord), 23
- Ferguson, Patrick, 62
 “flying army,” 63–65
See also Continental Army
- Fort Cumberland, 15, 18
- Fort Duquesne, 16, 17–18, 20
- Fort William, 65
- France, 10, 21, 48, 52
 colonies of, in the New World,
 15–17
- Fraser, Simon, 42, 47
- Freeman, Isaac, 42
- Freeman's Farm, 42–44, **45**, 47
- French and Indian War, 21, **22**
- Gates, Horatio, 6, 40, 41, 42, **43**, 44,
 46, 49, 59–61
- George III (King), **22**, 23, 24, 26, **41**,
 74
See also Great Britain
- Graham, James, 7, **49**
- Great Britain, 21
 and the Battle of Cowpens, 9–13,
 69–72
 and the Battle of Monmouth, 53–55
 and battles in New York, 39–49
 and battles in the South, 58–68
 and Canada, 28–35
 colonies of, in the New World,
 15–18
 and Lord Dunmore's War, 23
 and the start of the American
 Revolution, 24, 26
 surrender of, at Yorktown, 74–75
- Greene, Nathanael, 6, 39, 62–65, 67,
 73
- Hamilton, Alexander, 77
- Heard, James, 75
- Henry, Joseph, **29**
- Higginbotham, Don, 7
- Howard, John Eager, **67**, 68
- Howe, William, 36–40, 46, 50, 52
- Jefferson, Thomas, 77–78
- King George's Proclamation of 1763,
 24
See also Great Britain
- Lafayette, Marquis de, 73
- Lee, Charles, 53–54, **55**
- Lee, Henry (“Light Horse Harry”),
 62–63
- Lord Dunmore's War, 23
- Loyalists, 42, 58–59, 64–65

Numbers in *bold italics* refer to captions.

- Madison, James, 77–78
- maps, 45, 69
- Marion, Francis, 62–63
- Monmouth Court House, 53–54, **55**
- Montgomery, Richard, 29, 31–32, **33**,
 34
- Morgan, Betsy (daughter), 21, 75
- Morgan, Daniel
 and the Battle of Bemis Heights,
 44–49
 and the Battle of Cowpens, 8–13,
 66–72
 and the Battle of Freeman's Farm,
 42–44, **45**
 birth of, 14
 in Canada, 28–35
 childhood and early life, 14–15
 death of, 79
 family life, 21, 57, 75
 as farmer, 21, 23
 on furlough (1777), 51–52
 health problems, 56–58, 60–61, 73,
 78–79
 during Lord Dunmore's War, 23
 marriage of, 21
 as a militia ranger, 19
 at Monmouth Court House, 53–54,
55
 in New York, 38–49
 personality of, 20–21
 political career, 77–78
 as prisoner of the British, 34–36
 promotion, 36, 54–57
 resignation of, from Continental
 Army, 56–57
 in South Carolina, 61–72
 tactics of, 11–12, 38–39, 53, 67–71
 at Valley Forge, 50–52
 as a wagon driver, 12, 15, 17–18,
 20–21
 and the Whiskey Rebellion, 75–77
- Morgan, Nancy (daughter), 21, 75
- Morison, George, 34
- muskets, **25**, 26, 27
- Native Americans, 16, 17–19, 21, 23
- Neville, Presley, 75
- New York, 39–49
- Ninety-Six, 62–63, 65
- Ohio, 15–18
- Olive Branch Petition, 26
- Pickens, Andrew, 64, 68, 71
- political career, 77–78
- Pontiac, 21
- Quebec (Canada), 28–35
- Republican Party, 77–78
- rheumatism, 57
- Riedesel, Baron von, 42–43
- rifles, 26, **27**
- Rutherford, Robert, 78
- Saratoga, N.Y., 48–49
See also New York
- sciatica, 57–58
- slavery, 23
- South Carolina, 62–66
 and the Battle of Cowpens, 9–13,
 66–72
 British forts in, 58–59
 civil war in, 59–60
- St. Leger, Barry, 41
- Tarleton, Banastre, 10–11, 13, 65–66,
 69–71
- taxes, **22**, 24
- Tramell, Dennis, 10
- Valley Forge, 50–53
- Vergennes, Comte de, 10
- von Steuben, Friedrich Wilhelm, 52, 54
- Washington, George, 6, 18, 23, 26,
 36–40, 46, 50, 51, 53–54, 56, 62,
 74
 and the Whiskey Rebellion, 76–77
- Washington, William, 64–65, 68–69,
70, 71
- Wayne, Anthony, 39, 56, **57**
- weapons, **25**, 26, **27**
- Whiskey Rebellion, 75–77
- Woodford, William, 55–56
- Young, Thomas, 13, 68