

Lesson: “Uncovering the Battle of the Cowpens” by John McPherson (Snohomish, WA)

Learning Model: Teaching for understanding using the Mystery lesson strategy

Thematic Strands Addressed: II. Time, Continuity, Change; III. People, Places, & Environments; IV. Individual Development & Identity; V. Individuals, Groups, & Institutions (NCSS, 2007)

Habits of Mind Addressed: Listening with understanding & empathy; thinking flexibly; striving for accuracy; questioning & posing problems; applying past knowledge to new situations; thinking & communicating with clarity & precision; creating, imagining, innovating; thinking interdependently (Costa & Kallick, 2000)

Rationale (background history):

The Southern Campaign, particularly that in the South Carolina Backcountry, is an often overlooked and ignored chapter in popular histories of the American Revolution, and consequently, school curriculums. For example, Gordon S. Wood’s bestselling mass-market overview of the war, titled *The American Revolution: A History* (Wood, 2002, p. 87) dedicates one page to the Southern Backcountry fighting that changed the course of the war and made the victory at Yorktown possible. Likewise, the two-year Southern Campaign is allocated six short paragraphs in a popular high school history text, *The American Republic: Since 1877* (Appleby, et al, 2005, pp. 85-86, 98), while the brief skirmishes at Lexington & Concord receive a five-paragraph treatment with supporting graphics. This is interesting when one considers that 18% of the American patriots that were killed during the Revolution died in South Carolina and that the Southern Campaign could claim 31% of all patriots wounded during the war. This does not include Tory dead and wounded, either. They were Americans, too (Edgar, 2001, p. 137). The Southern Campaign and its battles should not be overlooked in any unit of study dealing with the American Revolution. By utilizing the Mystery lesson strategy with my students, I may capture their interest and create powerful memories that will help my learners appreciate the significant contributions of Southern Campaign to the ultimate victory of the United States over Great Britain.

One of the key, and certainly most popular, victories achieved by the American Patriots in the Southern Campaign was the Battle of Cowpens. This battle served as the inspiration for the final battle in the Mel Gibson film, “The Patriot” and, according to battlefield historian Dr. Lawrence Babits (1998, p. xiii), Cowpens “was the finest American tactical demonstration of the war.” American General Daniel Morgan led a hastily-assembled, mixed force of Backcountry militia and Continental Regulars against a combination Tory & British Regular force led by the aggressive Banastre Tarleton. The Battle of Cowpens was fought in the Backcountry of South Carolina and it was a battle conceived by General Morgan. Morgan was able to assemble his army in such a way as to invite an attack by Tarleton’s forces. When attacked, Morgan’s officers quickly reacted to the field situation as it changed minute by minute. The battle was concluded by a rout of Tarleton’s force and the capturing of much of Tarleton’s supplies and his soldiers. One of Tarleton’s elite units was caught by surprise during the fight and nearly destroyed. Tarleton was forced to flee with what was left of his army from the battlefield. The “mystery” within this battle is why was it such a fine example of tactical prowess by the Americans?

In solving this mystery, students will arrive at an understanding of not only the Battle of Cowpens, but also how it relates to the American Revolution as a whole. It will lead students to want to answer other questions. How does this fight surpass the classic victories of Saratoga or Yorktown? Who deserved credit for the victory on one side and the defeat on the other? How did this battle provide the groundwork for ultimate victory in the Revolution? In what ways does this battle offer any lessons in leadership outside of military endeavors?

The Battle of Cowpens was won due to the efforts of General Daniel Morgan to interpret the terrain and utilize effectively the forces he had at hand. Morgan, unlike more traditional military leaders such as George Washington and Nathaniel Greene, valued militia and he understood how to use them in battle. He recognized their inherent weaknesses, especially that of repelling a bayonet assault. He also recognized the militiamen's expertise with the long rifle and he used this to great advantage in the battle. The British forces under Tarleton had been pushed to exhaustion chasing Morgan's force across the Backcountry. Morgan was smart to gain enough of a lead to give his army some rest as well as time to set up a "defense in depth." By the time Tarleton's force caught up with Morgan's force, Tarleton's men were road weary and spent. On the other hand, Morgan's men were rested, they had been deployed to take advantage of the lay of the land as well as the weaponry that they had available. Furthermore, Morgan's unique personality inspired his troops to achieve victory. Tarleton may have had flare, but he simply did not build enough time into the pre-battle schedule to show this. Tarleton's men were rushed into a fight, a fight that would be catastrophic to the British aims in the region.

To avoid further conditioning students to believe that all answers can be found in the textbook and that competency can be demonstrated solely through mastery-oriented tasks (Laureate Education, 1996), I have assembled the following Mystery Strategy lesson and related materials focusing on the Battle of the Cowpens during the American Revolution: (next page)

References

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“A Devil of a Whipping”

Victory & Defeat at the Battle of Cowpens

On a cold morning on January 17, 1781, two experienced and well-led armies fought a desperate battle after a month-long and exhausting chase through the forests, icy rivers, and muddy trails of the South Carolina Backcountry. Both armies were tired, and they were anxious to end the vicious murder and plundering that had characterized the fighting of the past year. The rebel army leader, Daniel Morgan had fought as a commander of the Continental Army in the North while the British commander, Banastre Tarleton had quickly risen through the ranks due to his daring and aggressive tactics. The two armies had committed terrible atrocities towards one another, and as they met on the field of battle, it was understood by both sides that should they lose, very few prisoners would be taken.

The two armies did not just simply come together by marching into each other's way. General Morgan had picked the battlefield just over a day ahead of time and positioned his army to block the road that Tarleton's British force was using to chase the Patriots. Morgan's army was a mixture of experienced militia fighters and battle-tested Continental Regulars. He also had at his disposal an experienced cavalry force. Tarleton would attack Morgan's "roadblock" by smashing into the Patriot lines with his feared British Legion and veteran infantry soldiers. Tarleton also brought with him two light artillery pieces manned by expert gunners. The battle was a relatively brief affair, just a little under two hours from start to finish. In the end, much of Tarleton's army would be destroyed or captured, its remnants with its commander forced to flee the field while being chased by Patriot cavalry. General Morgan would be hailed as a hero and his tactics would be studied by future military leaders even up to our own time.

Your challenge is to study the clues provided and construct a theory that explains why the Battle of Cowpens was such an overwhelming victory for the Morgan's Patriots. Why is it considered a masterful example of great planning and tactics? What mistakes were made? How did the Americans react to the ever-changing situation on the battlefield? Develop your theory using the clues provided and build connections between each clue to further enhance your thinking.

Your directions:

1. Generate preliminary hypotheses as to what happened on the Cowpens battlefield.
2. Work with your team to share your hypotheses & record these on paper.
3. Cut out the clues on the next few pages
4. Distribute the clues equally among your team members.
5. Have each member read through the clues
6. Discuss the clues as a team; place clues into related groups such as cause & effect, connections, etc.
7. Record any important observation made by your team. Also record any new or refined hypotheses.
8. Select the hypothesis that is best supported by your data.
9. Present your hypothesis to the class as a team; include in your presentation the data that supports your hypothesis.

Thomas Young, from the Laurens District (SC), was one of the Patriots at Cowpens on the morning of January 17, 1781. According to records, that day was also his 17 th birthday. He told in his own words what he experienced that day. Young received sword wounds in the right arm, both shoulders, and the head.

“The morning of the 17 th (January 1781)...was bitterly cold. We were formed in order of battle, and the men were slapping their hands together to keep warm—an exertion not long necessary...

About sunrise, the British line advanced at a sort of trot with a loud halloo. It was the most beautiful line I ever saw. When they shouted, I heard Morgan say, ‘They gave us the British halloo, boys. Give them the Indian halloo,...!’ and he galloped along the lines, cheering the men and telling them not to fire until we could see the whites of their eyes. Every officer was crying, ‘Don’t fire!’ for it was a hard matter to keep us from it.

I should have said the British line advanced under cover of their artillery, for it opened so fiercely upon the center that Colonel (William) Washington moved his cavalry from the center towards the right wing.

The militia fired first. It was for a long time a, pop-pop- pop, and then a whole volley; but when the regulars fired, it seemed like one sheet of flame from right to left. Oh! It was beautiful!”

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Brief Casualty figures for forces engaged at Cowpens Battle

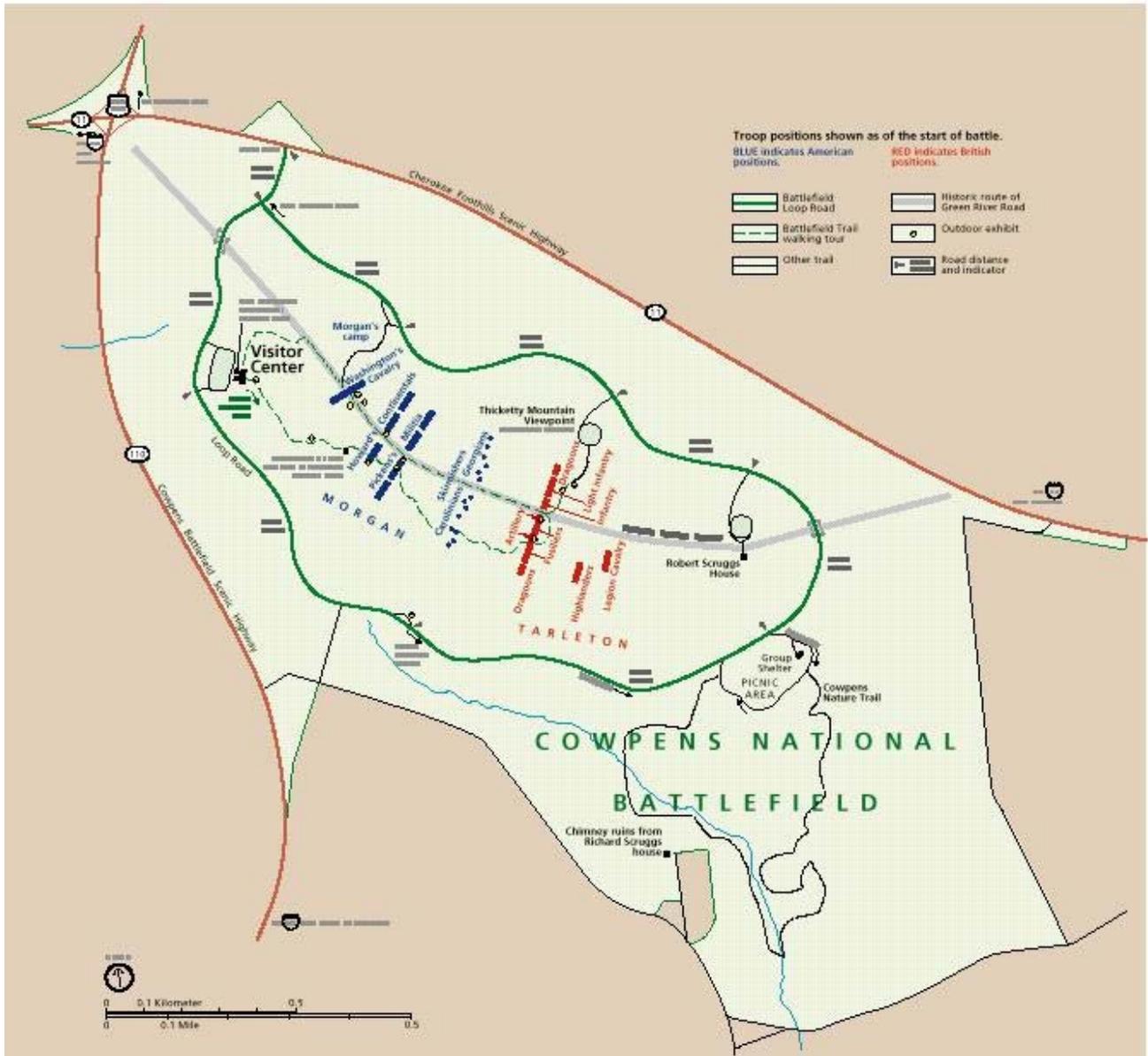
Force	# Engaged	Killed	Wounded	Captured by enemy	Aggregate Losses
British	1100	110	229	600	929
Patriot	800	24	120	0	360

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Morgan’s deployment of forces at the battle’s outset

General Daniel Morgan positioned his army in three lines. He placed the skirmishers, the best of the militia, at the top of a slight slope, with a good view of the enemy. They were to drive back Tarleton’s cavalry and withdraw to Picken’s line of militia 100 yards to their rear. The soldiers of the militia were to get off two shots and retreat behind the Continental Line 150 yards to their rear.

Positions of Morgan's & Tarleton's troops at the beginning of the Cowpens Battle.



Background on the British commander at Cowpens

Banastre Tarleton was raised in relative affluence in Liverpool, England, where his father was mayor. He attended Oxford University where he was known for his athletic ability. He wasted his inheritance, however; with what money he had left, he purchased a commission in the British army. Proud of his bearing, he asked to be sent to America.

In the American colonies, he, like Morgan, was known for his courage and daring and rose in rank to Lieutenant Colonel. Tarleton, however, generally commanded less respect from his soldiers than Morgan did. At the Waxhaws, a Scots-Irish settlement in South Carolina in present-day Lancaster County, he gained a reputation as a butcher when he was said to have killed Continental soldiers as they were trying to surrender. From then on, Patriot forces talked of revenge against Tarleton.

When he learned Morgan was operating in the backcountry, he began a rapid pursuit. He pushed his army, allowing them little time for food and rest. On the morning of January 17, 1781, he marched them from two in the morning to catch up with Morgan.

At daybreak, Tarleton rushed his troops into battle without rest and without waiting for possible reinforcements. He moved so fast, he established little communication with those officers under him. His army even out-raced their own cannon (two three-pounders.).

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Background on the Patriot commander at Cowpens

Daniel Morgan grew up on the Virginia frontier and lived his life as a frontiersman. As a young man, he was a wagon-driver in the French and Indian War. Courageous and mature, he fought against the British at Quebec and at Saratoga, New York. The attempt to take Quebec failed, but the Battle of Saratoga made him a hero.

Although he was promoted to brigadier general in the Continental Army, he preferred the homespun clothes of the militia, rather than an officer's uniform. He commanded respect from his soldiers and understood how they fought and how to motivate them.

At the Battle of Cowpens, he . . . arrayed his soldiers in three lines, giving the militia an honorable way to retreat against a British bayonet charge. (Militia could not fit bayonets on their Pennsylvania long-rifles.)

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From the Journal of Capt. Alexander Chesney

Loyalist Officer with Tarleton's British Legion

“The Americans were posted behind a rivulet, with their riflemen in front and cavalry in the rear. Colonel Tarleton charged at the head of his regiment of cavalry called the British Legion, which had been completed [made up of] from the prisoners taken at the battle of Camden by Lord Cornwallis. The cavalry was supported by a detachment of the 71st Regiment under Major McArthur. The enemy's riflemen were broken without difficulty, but the late prisoners seeing their own regiment opposed to them beyond would not proceed against it, and broke; the remainder charged, but were repulsed; this gave the front line of the enemy time to rally and form in the rear of his cavalry, which charged the 71st who were then unsupported. Making many prisoners. The rout was almost total.”

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From the Journal of James Collins

South Carolina Militia soldier, a teenager's view of the battle

About sunrise on the 17 th January, 1781, the enemy came in full view. The sight, to me at least, seemed somewhat imposing; they halted for a short time, and then advanced rapidly, as if certain of victory. The militia under Pickins and Moffitt, was posted on the right of the regulars some distance in advance, while Washington's cavalry was stationed in the rear. We gave the enemy one fire, when they charged us with their bayonets; we gave way and retreated for our horses, Tarleton's cavalry pursued us; (“now,” thought I, “my hide is in the loft;”) just as we got to our horses, they overtook us and began to make a few hacks at some, however, without doing much injury. They, in their haste, had pretty much scattered, perhaps, thinking they would have another Fishing creek frolic, but in a few moments, Col. Washington's cavalry was among them, like a whirlwind, and the poor fellows began to keel from their horses, without being able to remount. The shock was so sudden and violent, they could not stand it, and immediately betook themselves to flight; there was not time to rally, and they appeared to be as hard to stop as a drove of wild Choctaw steers, going to a Pennsylvania market. In a few moments the clashing of swords was out of hearing and quickly out of sight; by this time, both lines of the infantry were warmly engaged and we being relieved from the pursuit of the enemy began to rally and prepare to redeem our credit, when Morgan rode up in front, and waving his sword, cried out, “Form, form, my brave fellows! Give them one more fire and the day is ours. Old Morgan was never beaten.” We then advanced briskly, and gained the right flank of the enemy, and they being hard pressed in front, by Howard, and falling very fast, could not stand it long. They began to throw down their arms, and surrender themselves prisoners of war.

Remarks by John Eager Howard

Patriot commander under Gen'l Morgan during the battle

[On the day before the battle . . .] . . . Morgan judged that Tarleton would early press upon him. He therefore thought that the best thing he could do was to use his time in arranging the men, and he was careful to address the officers & men of the different corps to inspire confidence in them. [When asked why Morgan didn't cross a nearby river, Morgan replied:] "Had I crossed the river, one half of the militia would immediately have abandoned me," he was correct.

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Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton's Thoughts on the Battle

British commander at the Battle of Cowpens

"Upon the advance of the 71st, all the infantry moved on: The continentals and back woodsmen gave ground. The British rushed forwards: An order was dispatched to the cavalry to charge: An unexpected fire at this instant from the Americans, who came about [turned around to face the enemy] as they were retreating, stopped the British, and threw them [the British] into confusion. Exertions to make them [the British] advance were useless. The part of the cavalry which had not been engaged fell likewise into disorder, and an unaccountable panic extended itself along the whole line. The Americans . . . taking advantage of the present situation, advanced upon the British troops, and augmented their astonishment. A general flight ensued.

The number of the killed and wounded . . . amounted to near three hundred on both sides, officers and men inclusive: This loss was almost equally shared; but the Americans took two pieces of cannon, the colours of the 7th regiment, and near four hundred prisoners."

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Letter from Lord Cornwallis to Banastre Tarleton

A word of encouragement from one commander to another

January 30, 1780

You have forfeited no part of my esteem as an officer by the unfortunate event of the action of the 17th; The means you used to bring the enemy to action were able and masterly, and must ever do you honour. Your disposition was unexceptionable; the total mis-behavior of the troops could alone have deprived you of the glory which was so justly your due.

Remarks by General Daniel Morgan (Patriot leader)

His official report to Gen'l Nathaniel Greene on Jan. 19, 1781

“When the enemy advanced to our line, they received a well-directed and incessant fire. But their numbers being superior to ours, they gained our flanks, which obliged us to change our positions. We retired in good order about fifty paces, formed, advanced on the enemy, and gave them a fortunate volley, which threw them into disorder. Lieut. Col. Howard observing this, gave orders for the line to charge bayonets, which was done with such address, that they fled with the utmost precipitation, leaving their fieldpieces in our possession. We pushed our advantages so effectually, that they never had an opportunity of rallying, had their intentions been ever so good.”