The Revolutionary War in the Southern Back Country

James K. Swisher

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A master teacher, historian, and storyteller whose drive and dedication to reveal the southern revolutionary struggle was only equaled by his passion to complete a definitive biography of his hero, Francis Marion. Tragically, both efforts were interrupted by his untimely death.

Contents

Introduction

> "The Stream of Revolution, once started, could not be confined within narrow banks, but spread abroad upon the land."
>
> J. Franklin Jameson, *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement*

Deep beneath the blue gray water of Lake Norman, thirty-five miles northwest of Charlotte, lies Cowan's Ford on the Catawba River. About 4 A.M. on February 1, 1781, Charles Cornwallis, lieutenant general in the armies of George III and member of the House of Lords, spurred a reluctant mount down a steep embankment and into the Catawba, swiftly running four hundred yards wide and four feet deep at full flood. He was closely followed by Colonel Hall of the Brigade of Guards with the light infantry of the Brigade of Guards, their bayonets fixed on uncharged muskets and cartouche bags of cartridges strung about their necks. A bold British striking force was quietly attempting to force a river crossing, striving to cut off Daniel Morgan's victorious Colonials, now retreating north across the North Carolina back country. In as bold a feat of arms as

ever undertaken by a British army commander, Lord Cornwallis dispatched Col. James Webster leading a demonstration toward Beatties Ford and personally led the guards, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, and the Hessian von Bose Regiment in an assault across the raging Catawba at night, low-lying fog masking the advance.

Slinging their Brown Bess muskets, the guardsmen cut eight-foot wooden staffs to maintain their balance on the rocky bottom and plunged forward four abreast behind a quartet of mounted officers, three generals and a colonel. Cornwallis entered first, flanked by General O'Hara of the guards, General Leslie, and the aforementioned Hall. Proceeding quietly in anticipation of rebel fire, the scarlet-coated soldiers completed almost half of their crossing before shouts and frantic movements signaled their discovery. Musket balls began to zing alongside the column as Colonial militia, stationed at the ford, fired blindly at the splashes of advancing troops. From upstream the boom of Webster's 3-pounders could be heard above the roar of rushing water. O'Hara's horse suddenly stumbled and rolled, throwing its rider under, while Leslie was swept from his saddle to be saved by a guardsman's extended staff. Standing to wave his guardsmen on, Hall was struck and killed by a musket ball just as Cornwallis's horse was hit for a second time. A contingent of light infantrymen sprinted past Cornwallis, sweeping up the steep bank on the Colonial side with bayonets, paused to load, and formed ranks. Cornwallis dismounted as his horse fell dead on the rebel bank. A musket ball struck Gen. William Lee Davidson, the capable American militia commander, setting off a confused and precipitous Colonial retreat. The desperate river crossing was complete.

Nearly a month earlier, in the damp, cold fog of early

morning on January 17, 1781, a ragged American force composed of militia battalions, Continental regiments, and a few cavalrymen huddled about campfires on the gentle slopes of a broom-straw field interspersed with oaks and chestnuts. A tall, rawboned, forty-four-year-old brigadier general, identified only by his uniform and wearing a battered old sword, stalked arthritically from fire to fire, joking, laughing boisterously, and patiently explaining his plans for first light. "Bany" was coming at a gallop, but if they listened to the Old Waggoner, Banastre Tarleton and his regulars would be running by noon.

A child of the frontier, his back scarred with 499 lashes of a British whip, this veteran of Braddock's inglorious defeat and a hundred Indian fights was a born backwoods leader. He could neither read nor write until taught to do so by his sixteen-year-old bride. With a lack of education, ignorance of the military arts, and a loud and profane method of expression, Daniel Morgan would never have attained leadership of a single file in the caste-defined British system of officer selection. But on the American frontier leadership was attained by merit and here on the dew-covered slopes of Cowpens, South Carolina, he brilliantly placed his followers in progressively stronger lines, constructing a tactical trap for Tarleton's aggressive and impatient nature. In doing so Morgan achieved one of the most outstanding American tactical victories of the revolution.

Astride a broken-down old nag, his leggings soaked with dew, the scar-faced Morgan anxiously viewed the Mill Gap Road from which he knew British outriders would appear. He was exactly what he appeared: a barroom brawler of fearless reputation. He led by example and demanded equal effort from those who followed him. Physically, despite his infirmities, he could and would whip any man

Mill Gap Road. On January 17, 1781, Daniel Morgan observed green-coated dragoons followed by the scarlet of British infantry emerge from the mists on the Mill Gap Road. (*Photo by Penny Swisher*)

on the field, friend or foe. Beneath that coarse exterior lurked a heaping of common sense and the patience to integrate a ragtag force of militia and Continentals and outgeneral, outmaneuver, and outfight a combined arms strike force of professional soldiers. As Morgan swung his arms from side to side to keep warm while vapor trails issued from his lips he spied what he sought. Through the pine limbs, green coats of the British Legion appeared, followed by the scarlet and white of the infantry. Morgan wheeled his horse and galloped for his first line of militiamen.

These vignettes, and a hundred similar others, illustrate the stellar individual contributions that characterize this final and decisive campaign of the revolution. Many of these individuals so intimately involved in the war can be recalled only by their fading pictures hung on the walls of county courthouses or schools. Occasionally they find mention in dated old history texts. Numerous counties and villages in the southern back country of North America are named for patriot heroes, but their actual deeds are often forgotten in the mythology of a dusty past. British and Hessian participants met an even more inglorious end. Buried where they fell, alongside roads or in plowed fields, these brave men disappeared even from the memories of families and friends far away, forgotten like the cause for which they fought.

But in the spring of 1775, these men were creating history. Numerous protests, boycotts, and acts of civil disobedience coalesced into open conflict between Great Britain and her North American colonies. Strangely, those provinces most like the mother country revolted just as an era of expected imperial glory emerged as a result of France's concession of her American colonies. During the

almost eight years of warfare that followed, a nation was birthed, one that has exerted more impact upon modern world history than any other and now stands alone as a global superpower. The ensuing revolution was contested over a vast territory extending from Canada south to Florida and stretching inland from the Atlantic Ocean to the Appalachians and beyond.

Prior to 1775, American protests led to some quartering of redcoat infantry in the Colonies, particularly in Boston, Massachusetts, a major seaport, economic hub, and center of protest and defiance. In April, when Gen. Thomas Gage detached grenadiers and light infantrymen toward Lexington in search of a powder cache, he inadvertently touched off a powder keg. An exchange of gunfire on the triangular village green triggered a fighting retreat from Concord by 1,800 British troops who absorbed 73 killed and 174 wounded from swarms of rebel militia firing from every stone wall or copse of trees. As a result Boston was soon besieged by an armed mob of floppy-hat-wearing musket bearers. In January an attempt to break the rebel lines saw a blood bath on Breed's Hill, where another 226 British soldiers were slain, including many prominent officers.

George Washington, a Virginia planter, was appointed by the Continental Congress to organize an army from the almost fifteen thousand volunteers about Boston. He quickly approved an invasion of Canada by Generals Phillip Schuyler and Benedict Arnold, an endeavor that failed abjectly. On March 27, 1776, Gen. Robert Howe, who had replaced the unenthusiastic Gen. Thomas Gage, temporarily evacuated Boston, moving the army to Halifax, Nova Scotia. The Colonies were free of British troops.

This action was only preparatory to an actual campaign, and on June 25 Howe landed an overwhelming army on

Staten Island near New York City. Thirty-two thousand British regulars and Hessian allies stormed ashore, the largest expeditionary force ever dispatched from England. Desirous of awing the American Congress into a negotiated settlement, he launched a traditional campaign intended to clear New York and New Jersey of Colonials and defeat Washington's rebel army. But Washington, after serious setbacks around New York, realized that the odds dictated his adoption of a policy of preservation and avoided confrontation with the main Hessian and British army.

A subsequent action saw British commanders launch a selected army down the Lake Champlain route from Canada in an attempt to cut off New England from the remaining Colonies. Gen. John Burgoyne led the grandiose invasion but was surrounded and forced to surrender near Saratoga, New York. This mini-disaster has often been called the turning point of the war. French intervention was forthcoming and fighting in the northern theater soon largely was stalemated. Sir Henry Clinton replaced Howe as commander, but his troops were generally confined to the New York area without the ability to fight Washington, save on the American choice of terms. Since this initial campaign to recapture the Colonies had miscarried, reconsideration of a further strategy was necessary.

With the active entrance of France into a war rapidly spreading to worldwide significance and an ever hardening impasse in the northern combat zone, the British ministry was forced to reduce the resources it employed to defeat the American rebels. In addition, control of all-important sea lanes was now subject to interruption by the French fleet. But the king and his ministry refused to concede freedom to the Colonies, instead determining to increase reliance on American Loyalists. British strategists considered instituting

a southern campaign to break the northern stalemate. Clinton and others were convinced that Loyalists were more prevalent in the southern provinces and that these Tories would openly declare their support when a British army appeared. Additionally, weather in the southern states permitted year-round campaigning, while in northern climes armies were inactive during winter. Too, the British foothold in Savannah, strengthened by the repulse of a French attack, encouraged their expansion of power from that base.

Based, therefore, on unsupported evidence of a groundswell of Loyalist support and under continuous pressure from the home office, Clinton launched the second strategic phase of the American Revolution, an invasion of the American southern provinces. In September 1779, when thirty-eight hundred reinforcements arrived in New York, Clinton withdrew troops from Rhode Island and initiated an expedition to the southern provinces utilizing eighty-seven hundred soldiers. The basic plan was to chop off one state at a time, beginning with Georgia and moving north to South Carolina, then North Carolina, and finally, Virginia. One by one, the southern colonies would return to British control and the northern provinces, isolated, blockaded, and besieged, would not long be able to resist. The consolidation of these provinces into the empire would bring with it the economic advantages of holding Charles Town and Savannah. With patience and a slow, deliberate approach, the strategists could see a slow demise of rebel solidarity. This decision would bring about a second turning point in the revolution, a juncture more definitive than the surrender at Saratoga.

This second phase of the revolution was initiated with high hopes of success. The major shift in British strategy and the expected consolidation of the southern provinces

would discourage their northern sisters from continued resistance. Historically, the campaign to recapture America from the south has been underestimated in its critical importance and almost forgotten in its military significance. As the campaign was extended and moved inland the nature of revolution evolved into partisan, guerilla, or even civil war, and the viciousness of action increased dramatically. Colonial armies developed tactics to combat invasion while tough professional British forces faced some of the most daunting expeditions of their history as they forged into the back country.

On the eve of the revolution the southern back country encompassed an area from Maryland through the Piedmont, or the western portions of four British colonies: Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Heavily wooded and well watered, this tract was bound on the west by the crest of the Appalachian Mountains and on the east by the fall lines of the many rivers that drained from these mountains to the Atlantic Ocean. This elongated, peninsular-shaped region stretched from the Potomac River to mid-Georgia and had been sparsely populated by Europeans until the migrations after 1725. Its green, rugged land stretched endlessly into folding mountain crests. A region of striking contrasts, the back country was so heavily forested in places that foliage overlapped and prevented any view of the sky, making travel difficult. Contrasting areas, however, were parklike and open, awarding the observer with superlative vistas.

Oak, hickory, and chestnut trees thrived in the valleys and alongside streams, while the higher elevations were clothed in birch, maple, spruce, and pine. In the fall a myriad of colors—rust, yellow, red, and brown—filled the hillsides in profusion. The beauty of mountain laurel, flowering

dogwood, and wild azaleas was breathtaking in spring. Game was plentiful. Deer, elk, and woodland buffalo roamed the valley while turkeys gobbled in the thickets. Rattlesnakes and moccasins were numerous, presenting a constant danger. Panthers and wolves prowled the ridges; overhead, eagles spiraled and hawks dived in swift stoops.

As streams of land seekers poured south down the Great Wagon Road in the years prior to the revolution, population rates soared. Eager immigrants attempted to carve out a home in the tough environment. Subsistence farming dominated the decent soil as fields of corn, potatoes, and vegetables were scattered about and rangy cattle and half-wild pigs roamed the fields and woods. Labor was family produced, the large numbers of children working the cornrows and gardens. A few indentured servants joined the hardworking pioneers, but slavery was almost nonexistent. The predominant cash crop of future years, tobacco, had not yet appeared as a part of the area's agriculture. The southern back country was a hardscrabble existence, available for freedom seekers, but only to the rough and persistent. It was these determined survivors who would come face to face with the invading British and who, unexpectedly and unbelievably, would change the course of America's war.

This book will attempt to analyze the sequence of battles that occurred as a result of this basic British strategic change and the modification of that strategy, which pushed the fight into the Carolina back country. From the two Indian wars of earlier eras that reduced the threat of Indian allied participation in the revolution to the defense and capture of the great southern seaports, the sequence of events favored Crown armies. But active partisan groups from the back country were destroying the myth of Loyalism in the south. In an attempt to conclude the

revolt, an impatient Lord Cornwallis moved inland, intent on the destruction of American armies. Through a series of three critical battles in the winter of 1780-81, British superiority was seriously challenged and with accompanying French naval assistance the opposing armies set upon a path that led to Yorktown. After the surrender of a second major British army at that small Virginia fishing village, British will to continue the fight eroded much as American will to persevere in Vietnam would disappear some 200 years hence, and the British Admiralty conceded a war it was no longer willing to contest.