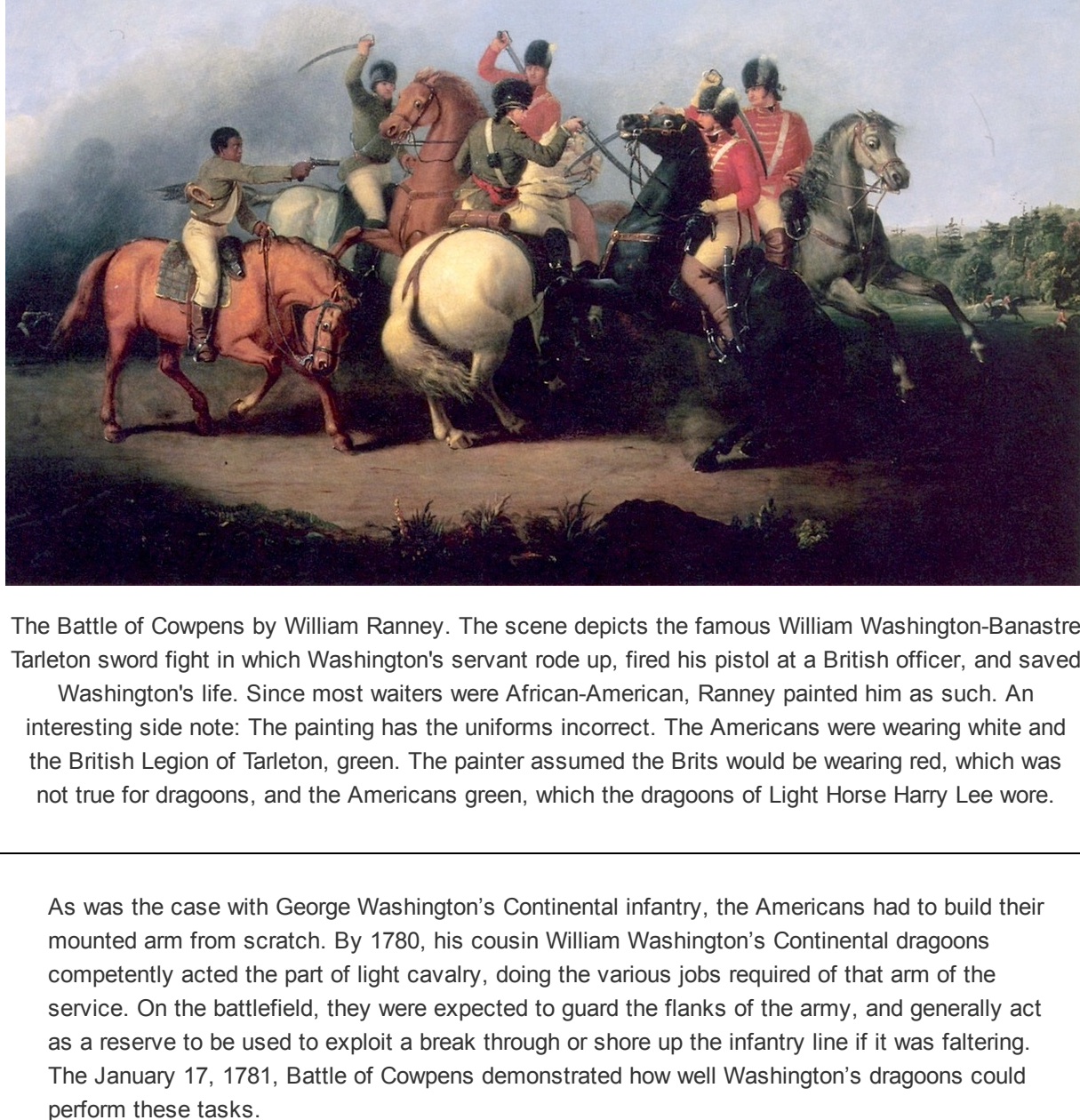




Col. William Washington's Dragoons at the Battle of Cowpens

By Dr. Laurence D. Schiller, August 14, 2020
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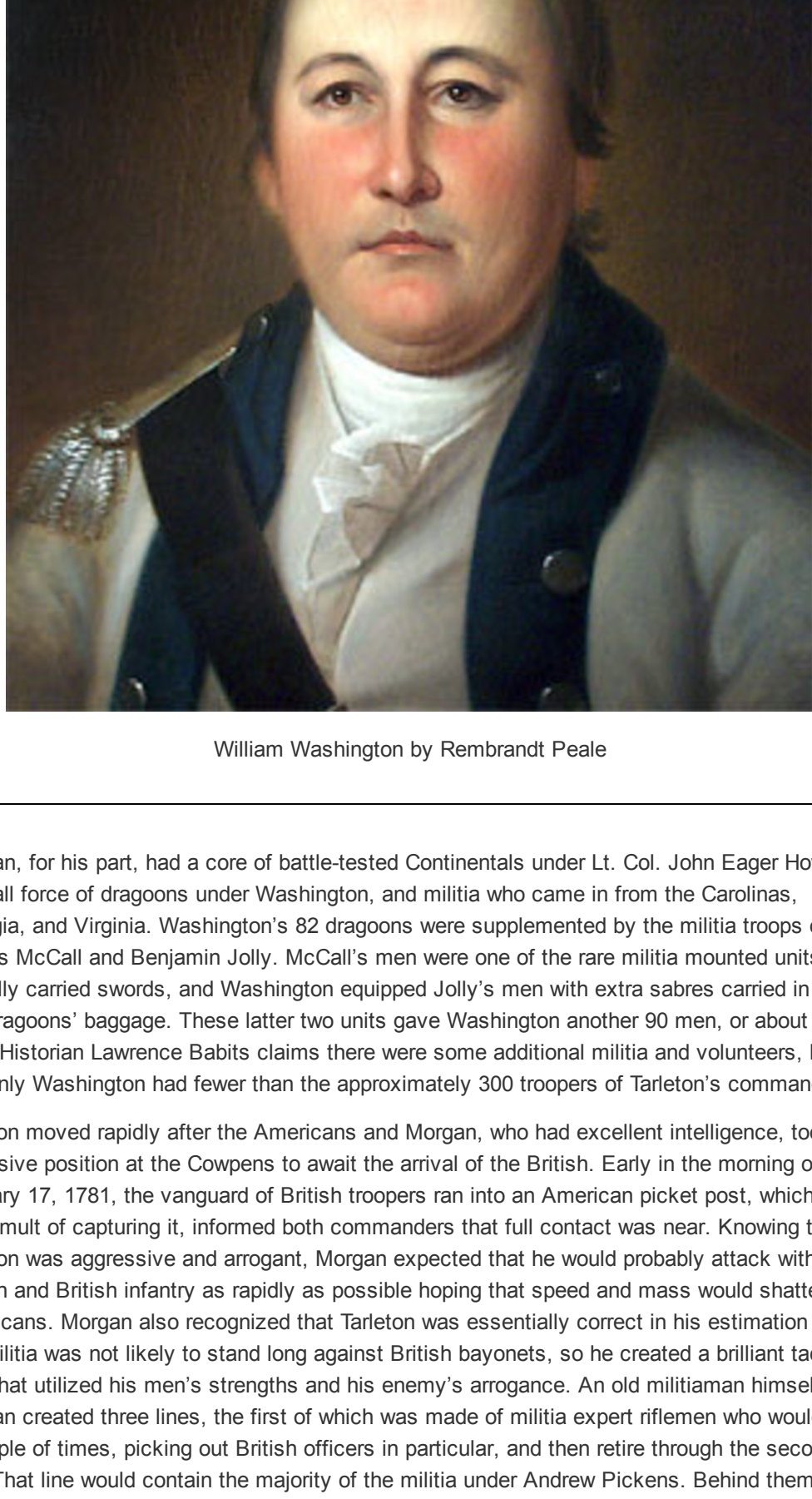
The Battle of Cowpens by William Ranney. The scene depicts the famous William Washington-Banastre Tarleton sword fight in which Washington's servant rode up, fired his pistol at a British officer, and saved Washington's life. Since most waiters were African-American, Ranney painted him as such. An interesting side note: The painting has the uniforms incorrect. The Americans were wearing white and the British Legion of Tarleton, green. The painter assumed the Brits would be wearing red, which was not true for dragoons, and the Americans green, which the dragoons of Light Horse Harry Lee wore.

As was the case with George Washington's Continental infantry, the Americans had to build their mounted arm from scratch. By 1780, his cousin William Washington's Continental dragoons competently acted the part of light cavalry, doing the various jobs required of that arm of the service. On the battlefield, they were expected to guard the flanks of the army, and generally act as a reserve to be used to exploit a break through or shore up the infantry line if it was faltering.

The January 17, 1781, Battle of Cowpens demonstrated how well Washington's dragoons could perform these tasks.

In December of 1780, Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene, who had been sent south to rebuild American fortunes after the twin disasters of the fall of Charles Town (Charleston) and the Battle of Camden, South Carolina, decided to divide his army into two parts in order to force his relentless opponent, British Gen. Charles The Earl Cornwallis, to choose to chase only one piece of the American army, or else split his own. Either way, Greene's brilliant strategy took the initiative away from Cornwallis, who had planned to invade North Carolina after his devastating victory over Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates at Camden on August 16.

But now, although the British had numerical superiority over the Americans in the south, much of their army was strung out in forts and outposts across Georgia and South Carolina. Moreover, his posts and supply columns were under continual attack by parties of Whig militia, forcing him to keep substantial numbers of his men protecting those assets. Then came Kings Mountain, Blackstock's Farm, and other Whig successes, which reversed Camden in the minds of local Tories and suppressed their support for Cornwallis. Greene took advantage of this by creating a "flying army" under the command of the wily "Old Wagoner" Brig. Gen. Daniel Morgan, who was perhaps the finest tactician on the American side of the Revolution. Morgan promptly moved to the west of Cornwallis, effectively sitting on his flank and daring him to come after him. A frustrated Cornwallis, still wanting to move into North Carolina, decided to send his best cavalry officer, the aggressive and often rash Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton, with his British Legion, 50 troopers of the 17th Light Dragoons, hundreds of experienced infantry regulars from several regiments, including the crack Frasier's Highlanders (71st Foot), and two cannon to chase Morgan down. Tarleton had about 1,100 to 1,200 men all told.

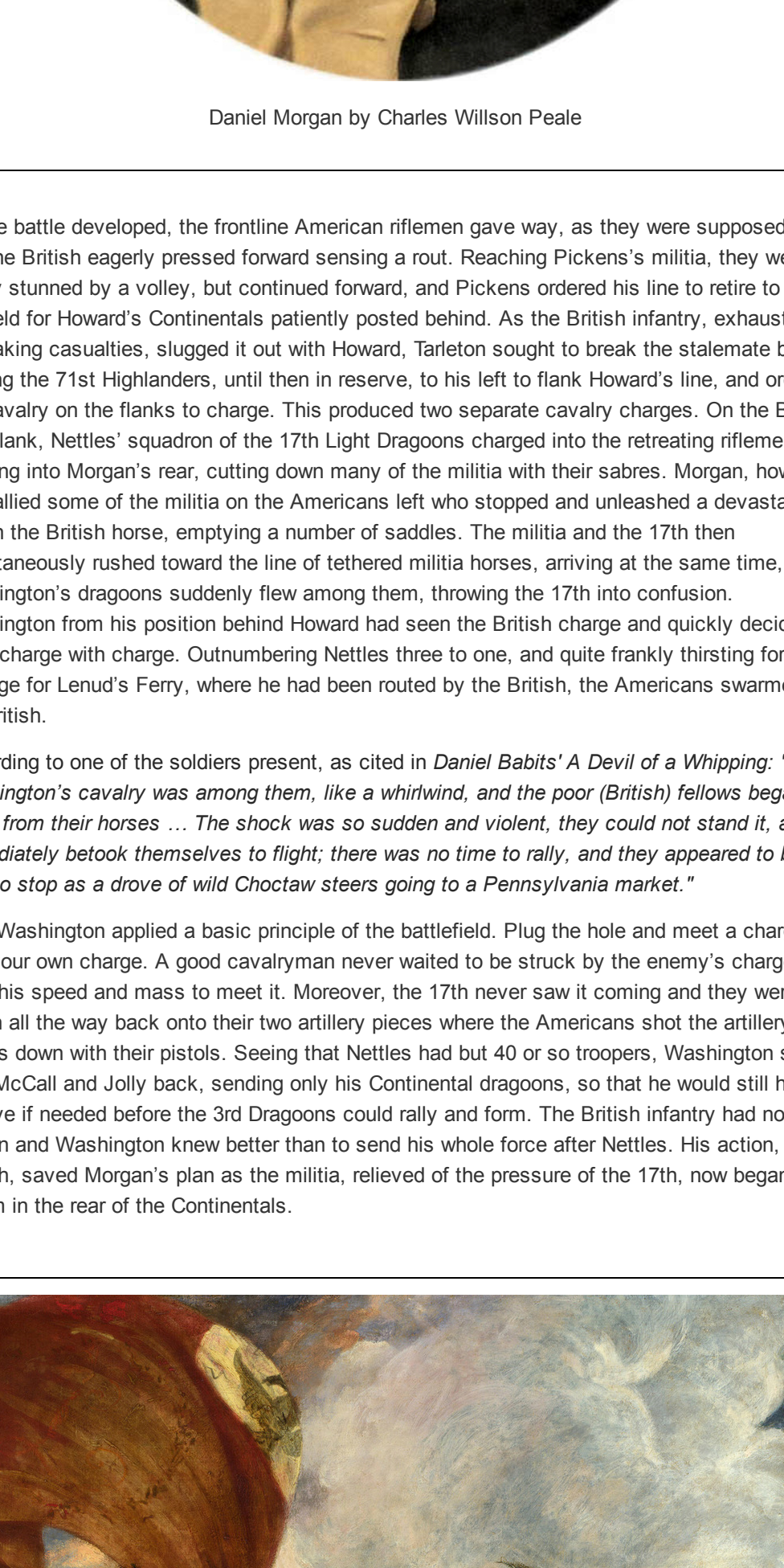


William Washington by Rembrandt Peale

Morgan, for his part, had a core of battle-tested Continentals under Lt. Col. John Eager Howard, a small force of dragoons under Washington, and militia who came in from the Carolinas, Georgia, and Virginia. Washington's 82 dragoons were supplemented by the militia troops of James McCall and Benjamin Jolly. McCall's men were one of the rare militia mounted units that actually carried swords, and Washington equipped Jolly's men with extra sabres carried in the 3rd Dragoons' baggage. These latter two units gave Washington another 90 men, or about 170 in total. Historian Lawrence Babits claims there were some additional militia and volunteers, but certainly Washington had fewer than the approximately 300 troopers of Tarleton's command.

Tarleton moved rapidly after the Americans and Morgan, who had excellent intelligence, took a defensive position at the Cowpens to await the arrival of the British. Early in the morning of January 17, 1781, the vanguard of British troopers ran into an American picket post, which, in the tumult of capturing it, informed both commanders that full contact was near. Knowing that Tarleton was aggressive and arrogant, Morgan expected that he would probably attack with his Legion and British infantry as rapidly as possible hoping that speed and mass would shatter the Americans. Morgan also recognized that Tarleton was essentially correct in his estimation that the militia was not likely to stand long against British bayonets, so he created a brilliant tactical plan that utilized his men's strengths and his enemy's arrogance. An old militiaman himself, Morgan created three lines, the first of which was made of militia expert riflemen who would fire a couple of times, picking out British officers in particular, and then retire through the second line. That line would contain the majority of the militia under Andrew Pickens. Behind them would be the steady Continentals under Howard, hidden behind the crest of a hill so the British would not know they were there until close approach.

Washington would command the cavalry that Morgan positioned in the rear of Howard in reserve. Morgan's position was protected on the flanks by a ravine on one side and weed-choked springs on the other, so the cavalry could worry less about a flanking attack coming from the side or rear and focus on plugging gaps in the line, stopping fleeing militia, or block any movement by British mounted troops to swarm around Morgan's infantry's flanks. Morgan trusted Washington and told him to use his good judgement as to what to do and when to strike. Tarleton, for his part, kept 200 of his Legion dragoons in reserve and positioned his troop of the 17th under Lieutenant Henry Nettles in the rear of his right flank and a troop of his Legion under Capt. David Ogilvie identically to his left, thus dividing his mounted force in a way that ultimately proved advantageous for Washington. When the British infantry moved forward, the flank dragoons accompanied them. Tarleton's idea was to have those two smaller forces immediately on the spot to exploit any break in the American line while his 200-man reserve waited to complete what Tarleton expected to be another Camden like rout.



Daniel Morgan by Charles Willson Peale

As the battle developed, the frontline American riflemen gave way, as they were supposed to, and the British eagerly pressed forward sensing a rout. Reaching Pickens's militia, they were briefly stunned by a volley, but continued forward, and Pickens ordered his line to retire to clear the field for Howard's Continentals patiently posted behind. As the British infantry, exhausted and taking casualties, slugged it out with Howard, Tarleton sought to break the stalemate by moving the 71st Highlanders, until then in reserve, to his left to flank Howard's line, and ordered the cavalry on the flanks to charge. This produced two separate cavalry charges. On the British right flank, Nettles' squadron of the 17th Light Dragoons charged into the retreating riflemen, bursting into Morgan's rear, cutting down many of the militia with their sabres. Morgan, however, had rallied some of the militia on the Americans left who stopped and unleashed a devastating fire on the British horse, emptying a number of saddles. The militia and the 17th then simultaneously rushed toward the line of tethered militia horses, arriving at the same time, when Washington's dragoons suddenly flew among them, throwing the 17th into confusion. Washington from his position behind Howard had seen the British charge and quickly decided to meet charge with charge. Outnumbering Nettles three to one, and quite frankly thirsting for revenge for Lenud's Ferry, where he had been routed by the British, the Americans swarmed on the British.

According to one of the soldiers present, as cited in *Daniel Babits' A Devil of a Whipping*: "Col. Washington's cavalry was among them, like a whirlwind, and the poor (British) fellows began to kneel from their horses ... The shock was so sudden and violent, they could not stand it, and immediately betook themselves to flight; there was no time to rally, and they appeared to be as hard to stop as a drove of wild Choctaw steers going to a Pennsylvania market."

Here Washington applied a basic principle of the battlefield. Plug the hole and meet a charge with your own charge. A good cavalryman never waited to be struck by the enemy's charge but used his speed and mass to meet it. Moreover, the 17th never saw it coming and they were driven all the way back onto their two artillery pieces where the Americans shot the artillery horses down with their pistols. Seeing that Nettles had but 40 or so troopers, Washington sagely kept McCall and Jolly back, sending only his Continental dragoons, so that he would still have a reserve if needed before the 3rd Dragoons could rally and form. The British infantry had not yet broken and Washington knew better than to send his whole force after Nettles. His action, though, saved Morgan's plan as the militia, relieved of the pressure of the 17th, now began to reform in the rear of the Continentals.

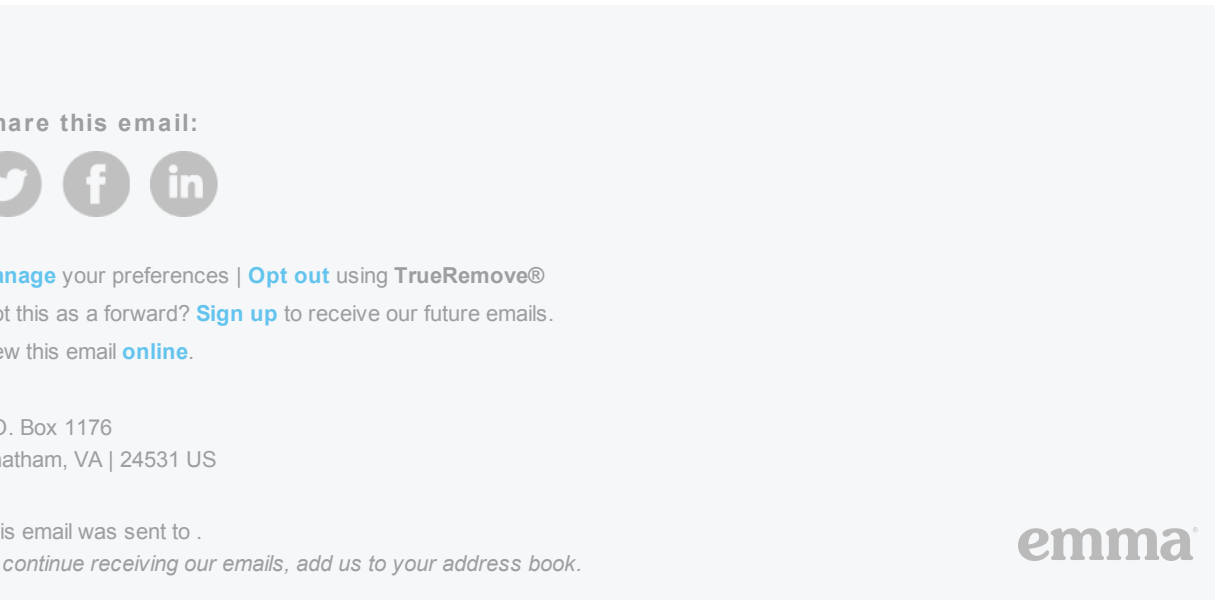


Banastre Tarleton by Sir Joshua Reynolds

Meanwhile, on the Redcoat left, at Tarleton's order, the British Legion dragoons under Ogilvie launched their own attack on a group of North Carolina skirmishers protecting Howard's right flank. Cutting through McDowell's militia company and pushing them back and to their right, a gap opened for the Highlanders following close behind that put Howard's right flank in peril. The militiamen, though, continued to pepper the British Legion from the far right, holding them up just long enough for Washington to act. Now the wisdom of Washington's decision to keep McCall and Jolly in reserve bore fruit as the militiamen rode to plug the gap left by the skirmishers and smashed into Ogilvie's Tories. One of them, Thomas Young, later wrote, "I soon found that the British cavalry had charged the American right. We made a most furious charge, and cutting through the British cavalry, wheeled and charged them in the rear." Showing their experience, the Americans cut through the green jacketed British Legionnaires twice, which meant that they were disciplined enough to rally and charge again. Once again, Washington had put significant numbers against the British horse, while Tarleton kept his 200 in reserve. When Tarleton saw Ogilvie fall back, he ordered his reserve forward, but they failed to move contributing to the coming British crisis. Moreover, the Continental dragoons, having eliminated the 17th Light as a threat, rallied and formed behind Howard, now again ready to plug his line, disrupt the British, or charge to create a rout.

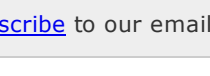
Their moment would shortly come as the critical point in the battle had now arrived. Howard was being heavily pressed by the main British line, although they had suffered heavy losses, especially in officers. But his right was threatened by Frasier's Highlanders who moved to crush his flank. Howard, properly, tried to refuse his right flank to face the Scots, but a mix-up in orders led some of his men to start to retreat. But Howard realized that all they needed to do was redress, and so gave orders as Morgan, furious, rode up demanding to know why they were retreating. Howard assured him all was well, no rout was in progress, and Morgan directed them to reform in front of Washington's dragoons. The Highlanders, though, thought Howard was falling back in confusion and broke toward them in pursuit. Washington, seeing them come on also saw his opportunity. "They're coming on like a mob," and sending a courier to Howard he said, "Give them one fire and I'll charge them." Washington quickly cleared Howard's line and Howard, with the 71st within 30 yards, had his Continentals turn and fire, laying half the Scots on the ground. While the Continentals charged with the bayonet, Washington charged them with the sabre from the rear joined by the rallying men of McCall and Jolly, while the reformed militia from the American left pushed into the reeling Highlanders. Tarleton watched in amazement as victory turned into apparent defeat. Attempting to retrieve something, he ordered his 200 British Legion cavalry forward, and they were ignored. But he seen William Washington's cavalry run down Nettles and Ogilvie and were not keen on trying their luck. They left the field, a fuming Banastre Tarleton in tow, leaving over 300 dead and wounded comrades. The Americans captured another 500 British, 2 pieces of artillery, 35 wagons, a traveling forge, and all their music, a disaster that not even the vain Tarleton could explain away except by blaming his own troops for cowardice.

At the battle of Cowpens, Washington demonstrated his understanding of cavalry tactics in battle, and his men demonstrated their grasp of the charge with the sabre. Moving to protect the infantry against his opponent's horse, plugging the line when necessary, and charging the Scots infantry to create a rout, he utilized his small force of mounted men to their fullest potential and was instrumental in influencing the outcome of the battle. Given the flexibility of command by Morgan, he used his judgement to use his men with sufficient mass and speed to defeat the enemy who divided his forces allowing the Americans to apply overwhelming force at each point while Tarleton failed to use his greater mass to compensate. The Continental dragoons were taught that the sabre was the proper weapon for a cavalryman, and they used it with great ability.



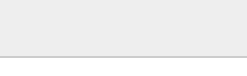
Washington Light Infantry Monument at Cowpens National Battlefield | NPS

Excerpted from Dr. Laurence Schiller's upcoming book, *Charge 'Em Boys: The Evolution of Civil War Cavalry Tactics*.
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