

Battle of Cowan's Ford

Commemoration as Sons of the American Revolution National Event

by William Lee Anderson III

Introduction

After the Battle of Cowpens on 17 January 1781, Brigadier General Daniel Morgan captured and marched away with about 500 British prisoners. These were professional soldiers that were desperately needed by Lieutenant General Charles Lord Cornwallis. Over the next two weeks, Cornwallis made every effort to recapture them. That led Cornwallis to the rain-swollen Catawba River which was crossed at Cowan's Ford on the night of 31 January – 1 February. Brigadier General William Lee Davidson's North Carolina militia troops resisted this crossing in what was named the Battle of Cowan's Ford. Davidson was killed.

In recent years, the Mecklenburg Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) has commemorated this event on the Saturday closest to 1 February. This document is an application to designate this commemoration as a SAR national event.

History

Throughout the American Revolution in the South, Cornwallis attempted to engage the principal American Army. Major General Nathanael Greene attempted to evade while gathering reinforcements. After the Battle of Cowpens, Cornwallis's first objective was to pursue and capture Morgan's army with its 500 British prisoners taken at Cowpens. Cornwallis's army marched through upstate South Carolina and into Lincoln County, North Carolina. On 23 January, Cornwallis's army encamped at the old Tryon/Lincoln County Courthouse, just south of present-day Cherryville, North Carolina. The next day, it marched to Ramsour's Mill, in present-day Lincolnton, North Carolina. A topological map suggests the British Army's route crossed the shallow upper reaches of Beaverdam Creek and then followed the ridge road that was the approximate current path of highway NC150. A map drawn by Joseph Graham in 1789 shows a road between Old Lincoln County Courthouse and Ramsour's Mill that crosses Indian Creek at, or near, Given's Mill. That map was redrawn by the engineering firm of D. A. Tompkins Company about the year 1900.



Lieutenant General Charles Lord Cornwallis
Painted by Painted by Thomas Gainsborough, 1783,
National Portrait Gallery, London

The British marching column would have been about 3 miles long and no doubt was an impressive spectacle. Almost all 2500 troops were professional soldiers wearing their distinctive uniforms. The former royal Governor of North Carolina Josiah Martin was present. There were hundreds of horses pulling wagons and artillery pieces.

Alfred Nixon wrote in *The History of Lincoln County*:

Cornwallis crossed the South Fork River at the Reep ford, one mile from Ramsour's Mill, and pitched his marquee [tent] on the Ramsour battle-ground; O'Hara remained on the west bank of the river at the Reep place; Webster occupied the hill west of Ramsour's Mill; while Tarleton who had crossed the river three miles lower down, between the Laboratory and the present railway bridge, in rejoining his chief, camped on the hill south of Cornwallis. Foraging parties were sent out in different directions to collect grain, and Ramsour's Mill was kept running day and night converting the grain into flour to replenish his Lordship's commissary. (Nixon 1910)

Nixon does not reference a source for these assertions. But if true, they suggest that Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton with his 400 cavalymen were dispatched from the main British Army to secure the opposite bank of the South Fork River. They crossed the South Fork River below the present-day railroad bridge. Meanwhile, the main army marched a bit further north before crossing the South Fork River at Reep Ford. An examination of a map suggests that the two parts of the British Army separated after crossing Indian Creek and took separate routes that could coincide with present-day NC150 and Old Lincolnton Crouse Road.

While at Ramsour's Mill, Cornwallis resolved to lighten his army. To improve mobility, he ordered destruction of all inessential supplies, baggage, and wagons. He wrote:

I therefore assembled the army on the 25th at Ramsour's Mill on the south fork of the Catawba, and as the loss of my light troops could only be remedied by the activity of the whole corps, I employed a halt of two days in collecting some flour, and destroying superfluous baggage, and all my wagons except those loaded with hospital stores, and four reserved in readiness for sick and wounded. (Cornwallis 1781 in Nixon 1910)

British commissary officer Charles Stedman wrote:

[Lord Cornwallis] by first reducing the size and quantity of his own, set an example which was cheerfully followed by all the officers in his command, although by so doing they sustained a considerable loss. No wagons were reserved except those loaded with hospital stores, salt and ammunition, and four empty ones for the accommodation of the sick and wounded. And such was the ardour, both of officers and soldiers, and their willingness to submit to any hardship for the promotion of the service, that this arrangement, which deprived them of all future supply of provisions, was acquiesced in without a murmur. (Stedman 1794 in Nixon 1910)

On 28 January, Cornwallis's army marched towards Catawba River, but lost three days of pursuit while waiting for the rain-swollen Catawba River to subside. During those days, British soldiers confiscated and consumed livestock of wealthy Whig farmer Jacob Forney, south of present-day Denver, North Carolina. Historian Clarence W. Griffin wrote:

Few persons during the war suffered heavier losses than Jacob Forney. When Cornwallis marched through Lincoln County in the winter of 1781, he was arrested in his progress by the swollen waters of the Catawba River. He fell back about five miles from the river to Forney's plantation, having been conducted there by a Tory well acquainted with the neighborhood. Here Cornwallis remained encamped for three days, consuming Forney's entire stock of cattle, sheep, hogs, geese, chickens, a large amount of forage, forty gallons of brandy, etc. His three horses were carried off, and many thousands of rails and other property destroyed. His gold, silver and jewelry, buried in his distillery, a greater portion of which he had brought with him from Germany, was found and confiscated. While the search was going on, his Lordship was quietly occupying the upper story of the family mansion, making it his headquarters. Forney and his wife, being old, were allowed the privilege of residing in the basement. As soon as he was informed that his gold, silver and jewelry were found, amounting to 170 pounds sterling, he was so exasperated for the moment that he

seized his gun and rushed to the stair steps with the determination to kill Cornwallis, but his wife quickly followed and intercepted him, thus preventing the most deplorable consequences. (Griffin 1937, 19).

On 31 January 1781, an American rear guard under Brigadier General William Lee Davidson planned to impede the British Army crossing the Catawba River. Guards were posted at Beattie's, Cowan's, Tool's, and Tuckasegee Fords. At Tool's and Tuckasegee Fords, he ordered felled trees to impede wagons (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 288). During the afternoon 31 January, Generals Greene, Morgan, and Davidson and Colonel William Washington conferred at Beattie's Ford's east bank. While there, Greene wrote a letter to Colonel Locke, commander of Rowan County militia, imploring immediate assistance (Tarleton 1787, 252–253). Morgan pulled his troops away from Sherrill's Ford marching towards Salisbury. Davidson transferred 200 troops from Beattie's to Cowan's Ford raising the strength there to 350. Captain Thomas Farmer of the Orange County militia remained in command at Beattie's Ford (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 290). At this time, Captain Joseph Graham had recovered from serious wounds inflicted at the battle of Charlotte 4 months earlier (W. A. Graham 1904b, 66). Davidson ordered Graham's cavalry to patrol all fords during the night. In 1833, Joseph Graham later testified:

on the 15th or 16th of Jan^y 1781 he [Joseph Graham] came to an encampment in said County near Tuckasegee Ford on the Catawba River where Colonel William Graham (then of this County now of Rutherford,) had the command of a Regiment of men then assembling to serve a tour of duty of three months and at different times from that to the 31st day of January saw him in command of said Regiment on the East side of Catawba in Mecklenburg and on the said 31st day of January near Cowans Ford (Graham 1833 in Espey, Samuel, pension application 1832) (Graham 1833 in Hill, James, pension application 1832) (Lofton, Thomas, pension application 1832)

That night, Cornwallis sent a diversionary force to Beattie's Ford while the main army marched to Cowan's Ford and successfully crossed at daybreak on 1 February. Brigadier General Charles O'Hara's unit, the *Brigade of Guards*, led the British across the river and suffered many casualties including some killed whose bodies were swept downstream (Henry 1899).

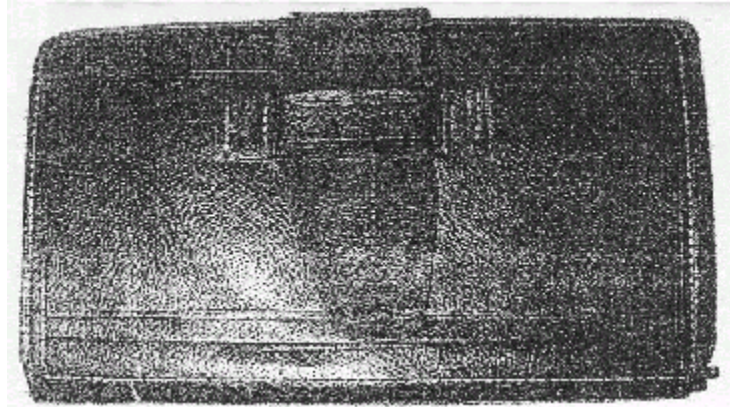


Battle of Cowan's Ford
Painted by Dan Nance, 2011.
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Davidson was killed at Cowan's Ford; some believed by Tory guide Frederick Hager's rifle shot (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 294). Today, a dam crosses Cowan's Ford immediately south of the McGuire Nuclear Power

Station. On 1 February 1971, Duke Power President William Bulgin McGuire officiated at a dedication of a new monument to Brigadier General William Lee Davidson. The text on the monument was written by historian Chalmers G. Davidson who indicated that “The exact spot [of Davidson’s death] is now under water near the east end of the dam.” (Pierce 1971)

British soldiers stripped Davidson’s body and confiscated his wallet, containing a transcribed message from George Washington and orders from Nathanael Greene. The wallet was sent to a British archive where it remained in obscurity until 1964 when rediscovered by Davidson’s biographer Chalmers G. Davidson.



William Lee Davidson’s Wallet

Among the Americans was Captain Joseph Graham who later wrote:

two of his company killed opposing their [British] passage, and his was the only company that went off the battle-ground in order and covered the retreat. (Graham 1832 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 50)

On the same day, Tarleton’s British Legion pursued the retreating American troops. He dispersed more militia at Torrence’s Tavern (Forney, Peter, pension application 1832). Peter Forney, a Lincoln County resident, was with the guard posted at Beattie’s Ford. On 31 October 1832, he testified:

I volunteered as one to reconnoiter the encampment of the British while they lay three days at my father’s plantation extending their lines on to a plantation which I occupied at that time. While they laid there they destroyed everything we possessed. After they moved from this position with the Main Army to Beatties Ford, I was one of those who took part on the opposite side, endeavoring to oppose what obstructions we were able to prevent their crossing and remained there until a part of the light troops had effected a passage at a bye ford four or five miles below at the ford called Cowan’s Ford – and in effecting our retreat, two of the men with me were lost, one killed and the other taken prisoner – upon this I fled to the widow Torrence’s being pursued by Tarlton’s [sic, Tarleton’s] troop of cavalry – at this place I found a considerable body of Militia, but in great confusion in consequence of the death of General [William Lee] Davidson who had been killed that morning by the British upon their crossing the River. Here our troops were utterly defeated and dispersed and I retreated across the Yadkin River and remained about Abbott’s Creek about six weeks. (Forney, Peter, pension application 1832)

On the evening of 1 February, Davidson's body was moved to Hopewell Presbyterian Church. He was buried in the cemetery there because the presence of British troops made it impossible to move his body to his home church Centre Presbyterian Church.



William Lee Davidson Grave
Hopewell Presbyterian Church Cemetery

Conclusion

The Battle of Cowan's Ford was the beginning of the Race to the Dan River in which Greene successfully evaded capture by Cornwallis. That success made possible Greene's later actions in North Carolina and South Carolina and ultimately to the American victory. Each year, the Mecklenburg Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution commemorates the Battle of Cowan's Ford at Hopewell Presbyterian Church.

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