

# Battle of Cowan's Ford

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*Defense of the Catawba River by North Carolina militiamen that helped save the American Army Southern Department*

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## **Introduction**

During the American Revolution in the South, the strategies of the British and Americans armies complemented each other. Lieutenant General Charles Earl Cornwallis attempted to engage and destroy the principal American Army. In reaction, Major General Nathanael Greene attempted to evade while gathering reinforcements and to fight only with advantageous circumstances.



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



Major General Nathanael Greene  
Painted by Charles Willson Peale, 1783.

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 Earl 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 during the early morning of 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.

This study benefits from several original sources including the correspondence of the two principal participants, Cornwallis and Greene:

- Cornwallis Papers, contemporaneous
- Cornwallis Orderly Book as copied, contemporaneous
- Cornwallis's report to Lord Germain, dated 17 March 1781
- Papers of Nathanael Greene, including correspondence with Morgan, contemporaneous
- Battle sketch and recollections of battle participant Joseph Graham, probably years later
- Memoir of participant Robert Henry, dated about 1850

## Acknowledgements

This report depends on the work and insights of two individuals who in recent months collaborated to extend the understanding of this battle. Their generous contributions are cited throughout the report and are sincerely appreciated.

- John Ferguson Misenheimer who for many years studied and considered every aspect of this battle. He is currently working on identifying every individual who participated.
- Stephen Wenzell who placed the battle in a larger context of events both before and after the battle. He identified previously overlooked questions that needed answers.

- January Costa, Lincoln County Historical Association archeologist, who provided guidance and found aerial photographs of historical Cowan's Ford before and after dam construction.

## Battle of Cowan's Ford

### Cornwallis's Plan

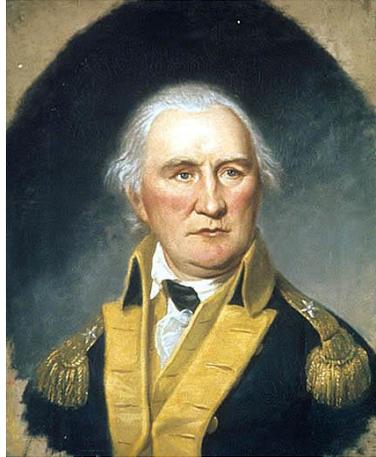
In a letter to Britain's Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord George Germain, Cornwallis described his plan for the winter campaign of 1781:

My Plan for the Winter's Campaign, was to penetrate into North Carolina, leaving South Carolina in security against any probable attack in my absence.

Lord Rawdon with a considerable body of Troops [in Camden] had charge of the defensive and I proceeded about the middle of January, upon the offensive operations. I decided to march by the upper in preference to the lower roads leading into North Carolina, because Fords being frequent above the Forks of the Rivers, my passage there could not be easily obstructed. General Greene having taken post on the Pee Dee, and there being few fords in any of the great rivers of this Country below their Forks, especially in Winter, I apprehended being much delayed, if not entirely prevented from penetrating by the latter route. I was the more induced to prefer this route, as I hoped in my way to be able to destroy or drive out of South Carolina the Corps of the Enemy, commanded by General Morgan, which threatened our valuable district of Ninety Six; and I likewise hoped by rapid marches, to get between General Greene and Virginia, and by that means force him to fight without receiving any reinforcements from that province, or failing of that to oblige him to quit North Carolina with precipitation, and thereby encourage our friends, to make good their promises of a general rising, to assist me in re-establishing His Majesty's Government. (Cornwallis 1781 in NCSR 1895, XVII:996)

### Cowpens

On 17 January 1781, Brigadier General Daniel Morgan's defeated Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton at Cowpens.



Brigadier General Daniel Morgan  
Painted by Charles Willson Peale, 1794.

Nonetheless, Cornwallis was not deterred. He later wrote:

The unfortunate Affair of the 17th of January [Cowpens] was a very unexpected and severe Blow; for besides reputation our loss did not fall short of 600 men; however, being thoroughly sensible that defensive measures would be certain ruin to the Affairs of Britain on Southern Colonies, this event did not deter me from prosecuting the original plan. (Cornwallis 1781 in NCSR 1895, XVII:996)

### **Cornwallis in Lincoln County, Ramsour's Mill**

#### **24–27 January 1781, Cornwallis at Ramsour's Mill**

While at Ramsour's Mill, Cornwallis resolved to lighten his army. To improve mobility, he ordered destruction of all inessential supplies, baggage, and wagons (Cornwallis 1781 in Newsome 1932, 3:289) (CPS 2010, 4:13). He wrote:

I therefore assembled the Army on the 25th at Ramsoure'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 in destroying superfluous Baggage. And all my Waggons, except those loaded with Hospital Stores, Salt and Ammunition, and four reserved empty in readiness for sick or wounded. In this measure, tho' at the expence of a great deal of Officer's Baggage, and of all prospect in future of Rum, and even a regular supply of provisions to the Soldiers, I must in justice to this Army say that there was the most general and cheerful acquiescence. (Cornwallis 1781 in NCSR 1895, XVII:996–997)

British commissary officer Charles Stedman wrote:

[Earl 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, 326)

British Brigadier General Charles O'Hara was an eyewitness to these actions. Later, in a 20 April letter, he recalled:

Lord Cornwallis sett the example by burning all of his Wagons, and destroying the greatest part of his Baggage, which was followed by every Officer of the Army without murmur. ... Cornwallis ordered "The Supply of Rum for a time will be Absolutely Impossible." ... Without Baggage, necessaries, or Provisions of any sort for Officer or Soldier, in the most barren, inhospitable, unhealthy part of North America, opposed to the most savage, inveterate, perfidious, cruel Enemy, with zeal and with Bayonets only, it was resolved to follow Greene's army to the end of the World. (Babits and Howard 2009, 15–16)

Supplies were burned to preclude any use by the Americans. (Morgan 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:216)

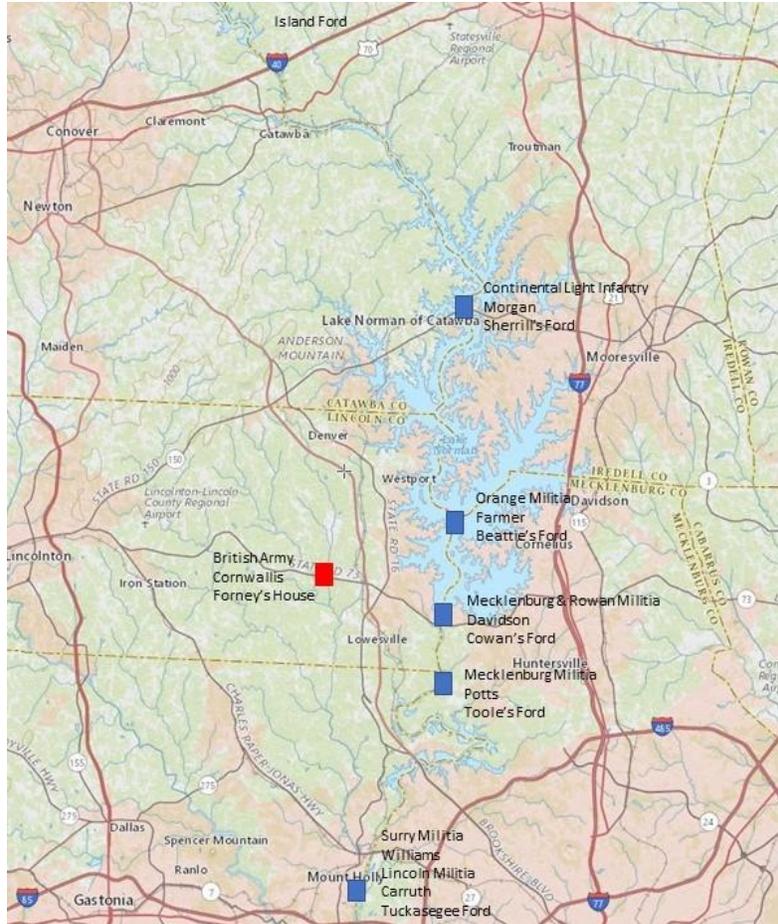
As the British Army approached Mecklenburg County, Ezekiel Polk, fearing for his personal safety, abandoned his home south of Charlotte and travelled to Pennsylvania. By March, his house was occupied by Brigadier General Thomas Sumter's family who were refugees from South Carolina. (Godey 1856) (Bass 1961, 141)

Morgan and Brigadier General William Lee Davidson informed Greene of Cornwallis's movements and threat to cross the Catawba River. Greene, who was on the Pee Dee River near Cheraw, South Carolina, realized that Cornwallis could separate his army there from its base of supply in Virginia. Greene quickly ordered his army to march north towards Salisbury, North Carolina. He notified North Carolina Governor Abner Nash to prepare the militia further east to confront Cornwallis (Morgan 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:206). Greene personally, with a small escort, raced to confer with Morgan (Morris 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:208–209).

## **Cowan's Ford**

### **28–31 January 1781, March to Catawba River, Jacob Forney's Plantation**

As Cornwallis's army entered Lincoln County, Brigadier General William Davidson deployed about 500 North Carolina Western District militiamen at the many fords on the Catawba River (Morgan 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:221). Colonel John Williams, of Surry County, was posted with 200 men at Tuckasegee Ford. Captain Potts, of Mecklenburg County, was posted with 70 men at Toole's Ford. Lieutenant Thomas Davidson, of Mecklenburg County, was posted with 25 men at Cowan's Ford. Colonel William Graham, of Lincoln County, was posted with approximately 60 men near Cowan's Ford. Colonel Thomas Farmer, of Orange County, was posted with 200 men at Beattie's Ford. At Tool's and Tuckasegee Fords, Davidson ordered trees felled to impede movement along the access road (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 288).



Catawba River fords defended by American forces

On 28 January, Cornwallis's army marched from Ramsour's Mill towards the Catawba River (Cornwallis 1781 in Newsome 1932, 3:289). Colonel Samuel Hammond, of the South Carolina militia, had followed Cornwallis's army since Cowpens. His report to Greene, believed dated this day, describes the difficult duties of his reconnaissance detachment.

Under cover herewith, your Excellency will see a copy of Gen. Morgan's order, directed to me, on the evening of the 17th January. In obedience to which, I placed myself with the few men under my command, in front of Lord Cornwallis' army, and paid every attention to their movements that was in my power; looking at them as often as possible, until their arrival at Ramsour's Mills, and have communicated to General Morgan and Col. Pickens [Andrew Pickens of South Carolina] their movements to that point. Their heavy baggage was burnt at that place, as I was informed and am authorized to believe. The army moved from there this morning, and from the best information I have been able to obtain, and from my own observation, I am induced to believe they intend to pass Catawba at McGowan's [Cowan's] Ford. My command are mostly with Col Pickens, having taken with me on my detachment of observation only twelve men, four of whom have been despatched with communications to General Morgan and Col. Pickens, which I presume have been handed to you. I am pretty certain

you may calculate on the approach of the enemy to south margin of the river this evening or early to morrow. My men and their horses are much fatigued and exhausted. We would be glad to have a day of partial rest, if possible, but wait your orders. Be pleased to inform me by the bearer where I may direct to Col. Pickens. (Hammond 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:229)

Actually, the British Army marched to Beattie's Ford, 5 miles upstream from Cowan's Ford, but found the river too swollen to cross. It retreated a few miles to John Bower's plantation (Cornwallis 1781 in Newsome 1932, 3:290). The next day, 29 January, it retreated farther to the rich plantation of wealthy Whig farmer Jacob Forney (Cornwallis 1781 in Newsome 1932, 3:290–291). During the next two days, while waiting for the river to subside, British soldiers confiscated and consumed Forney's livestock. 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).



Site of Cornwallis's Headquarters at Jacob Forney House  
Present-day house, known as Ingleside, built in 1817 by grandson Daniel Forney

Cornwallis later wrote:

In the mean time the rains had rendered the North Catawba impassable and General Morgan's Corps the Militia of the rebellious Counties of Rowan & Mecklenburg, under General Davidson, or the Gang of Plunderers, usually under the command of General Sumpter, not then recovered from his wounds [received at Blackstocks on 20 November 1780], had occupied all the Fords in a space of more than forty miles upward from the Fork, during its height. I approached the River by short marches so as to give the enemy equal apprehensions for several Fords (Cornwallis 1781 in NCSR 1895, XVII:997)

A few days after these events, Greene summarized this situation in a letter to Major General Friedrich von Steuben:

Since I wrote you by Major [Edward] Giles[,] Lord Cornwallis has been constantly in pursuit of Genl Morgan and has burnt his waggons and equip'd his Army in such a manner, as to move with the greatest facility. His force is about 2500 men. General Morgan by forced marches, kept out of the reach of his Lordship and has got off his prisoners in safety; but it was partly owing to a happy intervention of a great storm, which raised the Catabow so high that the Enemy cou'd not Cross. During which time the prisoners were pushed on over the Yadkin and are on their march for Virginia. (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:242)

On 29 January, Morgan personally visited Beattie's Ford and conferred with Davidson. Morgan wrote to Greene:

I just arrived at this place [Beattie's Ford] to view the situation. Genl Davidson is here with Eight hundred [actually about 500] men. The enemy is within ten miles of [this] place in force, their advance is in [sight. It] is uncertain whether they intend to [c]ross

here or not. I have deteched two hundred men [probably Colonel John Williams' Surry County militiamen] to the Tuckaseega Ford to fill it up & [De]fend it. An express Just arrived who informs they have burnd their waggons and loaded their [men very heavy. We] have taken four prisoners, who says they are for Salisbury. I am Just returning to Shireld Ford where our regulars lie. I expect they will attempt to cross in the morning. I will let you hear of every particular. (Morgan 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:215)

On 30 January, Captain Joseph Graham's cavalry conducted reconnaissance on the west side of the Catawba River:

With his [Davidson's] greatest force, and Graham's cavalry, he took post at Beattie's Ford, on the road from Ramsour's to Salisbury, being twenty miles above Colonel [John] Williams [at Tuckasegee Ford]. On the 30th [January], the cavalry were dispatched over the [Catawba] River, and ascertained that the enemy were encamped within four miles. (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 288)



Brigadier General Joseph Graham  
Artist unknown, about 1805.  
(W. A. Graham 1904b, frontispiece).

During that day, 30 January, Greene arrived at Sherrill's Ford (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:219–220). Initially, both Greene and Morgan believed Cornwallis might be prevented from passing the Catawba River. Greene issued the following orders:

- Requested 1000 Virginia militiamen from Colonel William Campbell (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:218–219).
- Requested the aid of Brigadier General Thomas Sumter who was in Mecklenburg County recovering from serious wounds (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:221).
- Ordered Major General Isaac Huger to march the Continental Army to Salisbury. Also, he ordered that Brigadier General Francis Marion march towards Camden to threaten the British stationed there. He ordered Lieutenant Colonel Henry Lee to force march to Sherrill's Ford. He

ordered that Colonel Thaddeus Kosciuszko join him at Sherrill's Ford. (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:219–220)

- Requested 1000 militiamen from Colonel Isaac Shelby (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:221).
- Ordered Colonel Anthony White to immediately send all dragoons from the Moravian Towns, near present-day Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to William Washington's cavalry at Sherrill's Ford (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:221–222).

Interestingly, Greene ordered Lee and White cavalymen to Sherrill's Ford. Lee was several days away in distance. That indicated that Greene did not necessarily believe Cornwallis's passing was imminent and that by strengthening the fords, Cornwallis might be halted. Early on 31 January, Colonel Thomas Farmer at Beattie's Ford sent a message to Greene:

Recd yours by Express about four oClock [yesterday]. Sent the Dispatches in fifteen Minuts after they came to hand. Have this Morning Brought over a Deserter who informs That the Number of the Enemy fit for Action is about 4500 [actual 2500] and Three Hundred Toreys. That they are Commanded by Ld Cornwallase, Genl Howard [O'Hara] & Genl Lesly. That there was orders to parade & March at 3 oClock yesterday, but Continued in Camp till night. Two Toreys was killed yesterday on a foraging Party for the British, That the artillarys of the Enemy are four 6 pound, four 4 pound & Two three Pounders. That the Enemy Waits the fall of the Water & intend to Cross at one of the fords which they say is Betys, Or another within five miles, or one fifteen Miles from Camp; He informs that some Spy bring Intelligence to the British Every Day from us, The Object in their View is Salisbury & that they Burned 100 Wagons &c. Quantity of Salt & flour at Ramsours Mill. (Farmer 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:228)

At about 2:00 p.m. on 31 January, Generals Greene, Morgan, and Davidson and Lieutenant Colonel William Washington conferred at Beattie's Ford's east bank (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 289) (Graham 1827 in Hoyt 1914, 257) (Davidson 1951, 112) (Higginbotham 1961, 150) (Babits and Howard 2009, 17) (Piecuch and Beakes 2009, 73). Graham witnessed the conference from a distance:

General Morgan and Colonel Washington met with him [Greene] at this place [Beattie's Ford] by appointment. They and General Davidson retired with him out of camp, and seating themselves on a log, had a conversation of about twenty minutes; ... About the time General Greene arrived, the British vanguard, of about four or five hundred men, appeared on the opposite hill beyond the river. Shortly after their arrival, some principal officer, with a numerous staff, thought to be Lord Cornwallis, passed in front of them in different stations, halting and apparently viewing us with spy-glasses. (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 289)

Greene decided to continue to strengthen the fords. To assist Davidson, Greene wrote a letter, primarily directed to Colonel Francis Locke, commander of Rowan County militia, imploring immediate assistance and to repair to Davidson's headquarters:

To the Officers Commanding the Militia in the Salisbury District of North Carolina

The enemy are laying on the opposite side of the river and from every appearance seem determined to penetrate the Country. Genl Davidson informs he has called again and again for the people to turn out and defend their Country. The inattention to his call and the backwardness of the people is unaccountable. Providence has blessed the American Arms with signal success in the defeat of Tarlton and the surprise of George Town by Col Lee with his Legion. If after these advantages you neglect to take the field and suffer the enemy to over run the Country you will deserve the miseries ever inseparable from slavery.

Let me conjure you, my countrymen, to fly to arms and to repair to [Davidson's] Head Quarters without loss of time and bring with you ten days provision. You have every thing that is dear and valuable at stake; if you will not face the approaching danger your Country is inevitably lost. On the contrary if you repair to arms and confine yourselves to the duties of the field Lord Cornwallis must be certainly ruined. The Continental Army is marching with all possible dispatch from the Pedee to this place [Catawba River via Salisbury]. But without your aid their arrival will be of no consequence. I am Sir, Nath Greene. (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:227–228) (Tarleton 1787, 252–253)

Greene, Morgan, and Davidson devised a contingency plan in case Cornwallis passed the river. If that occurred, Morgan's Continental Army troops would withdraw from Sherrill's Ford and join the remainder of the Continental Army proceeding up the Yadkin River. Davidson's militiamen would resist the crossing and if need be, withdraw to David Carr's plantation. The evidence for this contingency plan are the documented events that occurred during the following 24 hours. Greene advised Davidson that when the British decide to cross the river, their cavalry would likely cross at a secondary ford and attack the defender's rear at the main crossing (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 290).

About an hour after the meeting, Davidson transferred the militia cavalry and 250 troops from Beattie's to Cowan's Ford raising the strength there to 350. Probably during this movement, Davidson told Graham:

That though General Greene had never seen the Catawba before, he appeared to know more about it than those raised on it. (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 289)

Captain Thomas Farmer of the Orange County militia remained at Beattie's Ford (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 290). Davidson set up camp at the exit of the horse ford, the longer but shallower of two ford passageways. Lieutenant Thomas Davidson remained posted as a guard at the shorter, deeper wagon ford (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 291). Davidson ordered Captain Joseph Graham, who commanded the Mecklenburg militia cavalymen, to patrol all fords during the night (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 290). Graham had just recovered from serious wounds received at the battle of Charlotte 4 months earlier (W. A. Graham 1904b, 66).

Late in the afternoon, 31 January, Greene and Morgan returned to Oliphant's Mill near Sherrill's Ford. There, in the evening, Greene wrote to Samuel Huntington, President of the Continental Congress, that

there were not enough militiamen currently at the fords to prevent Cornwallis from crossing, and that he had small expectation of more arriving.

The fords are so numerous upon this river and our force so small that it will be impossible to prevent their passing: and we can give them but very little annoyance after they have crossed unless a great force comes to our relief. Genl Davidson informed me this evening that notwithstanding he had made use of every argument in his power to draw out the Militia, he had not more than 300 Men; nor had he but very little hopes of getting out a much greater number; and his district is said to contain more good militia than almost all the rest of the State. The people have been so harrassed for eight months past and their domestick matters are in such distress that they will not leave home; and if they do it is for so short a time that they are of no use. Twenty thousand men might be in motion in the manner the Militia come and go and we not have an operating force in the field of five hundred men....

The enemy are in force and appear determined to penetrate the Country, nor can I see the least prospect of opposing them with the little force we have, naked and distressed as we are for want of provision & forage. Our numbers are greatly inferior to the enemy's when collected and joined by all the Militia in the field, or that we have even a prospect of getting. The difference in the equipment and discipline of the troops give the enemy such a decided superiority that we cannot hope for any thing but a defeat. And the enemy being with out baggage we cannot avoid an action if we would, especially as we have no place where we can take post for want of provision and forage. (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:225–226)

Greene sent an order to Lieutenant Colonel John Luttrell who was near Salisbury approaching with his Orange County militiamen reinforcements. Greene ordered that Luttrell's mounted men join Washington's cavalry and all others to go to Beattie's Ford, presumably to join other Orange County militiamen under Colonel Thomas Farmer (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:227).

Early in the morning on 1 February, from Sherrill's Ford, Morgan described the American situation in a letter to Virginia Governor Thomas Jefferson. Interestingly, Morgan indicated that Greene had ordered the Continental Army which was marching up the Pee Dee/Yadkin River to join the American forces on the Catawba River.

The British army are on the south side of the River and I with my Little Detachment on the other. I think they will attempt to cross this morning. Never the less, we have filled up all the fords and thrown every obstruction immaginable in their way, they are in force and I have about two hundred and thirty Regular infantry, and about sixty horse, Genl. Davidson near five hundred Malitia. The inhabitants seem to make a stir, what they will do is unceartain, but I fear not much. Genl. Green arrived yesterday [30 January], he has ordered his little army to join us, they are not more than seventeen or eighteen hundred. This number and my detachment when join'd will be much inferior

to the enemy, who must be Near three thousand, well supplyd and provided for, and our men almost Naked. (Morgan 1781 in Higginbotham 1961, 150–151)

In 1833, Graham [testified](#) of a change in command of the active Lincoln County militia:

that on the 15th or 16th of Jan<sup>y</sup> 1781 he [Joseph Graham] came to an encampment in said County near Tuckaseegee 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 he the said Colo. was arrested by Brigadier General William L. Davidson on a charge of being intoxicated it being the day before the British crossed the Catawba River at said Ford where General Davidson fell and the Command of the Regiment devolved on Major John Carruth until after the Battle of Guilford Court House. (Graham 1833 in Espey, Samuel, pension application 1832) (Graham 1833 in Hill, James, pension application 1832) (Lofton, Thomas, pension application 1832)

### **1 February 1781, Cowan's Ford, Torrence's Tavern**

Cornwallis lost three days of pursuit while waiting for the Catawba River to subside. Finally, he decided:

after having procured the best information in my power I resolved to attempt the passage at a private Ford (then slightly guarded) near McCowan's ford, on the morning of the 1st of February. (Cornwallis 1781 in NCSR 1895, XVII:997)

On 31 January, Cornwallis issued the following three general orders. The last was supplemented by Leslie's brigade orders:

Head Q<sup>rs</sup>. Fawneys Plantation,  
31<sup>st</sup>. Jan<sup>ry</sup>. 1781

#### Orders

The Bat Horses are to be Loaded & the Army in readiness to March precisely at 9 oClock in the following Order.

L<sup>t</sup> Col Tarleton's Corps  
Yagers [German rifemen]  
Corps of Pioneers,  
Two Three Pounders,  
L<sup>t</sup> Col Webster's Brigade  
Two Six pounders,

Reg<sup>t</sup>, of Bose,  
North Carolina Volunteers  
Two Six pounders,  
Brigade of Guards  
Ammunition & Prov<sup>n</sup> Waggons  
Bat Horses of the Gen<sup>l</sup> Off<sup>rs</sup>.

Bat Horses of the Reg<sup>ts</sup>. in the same Order as their respective Corps.

Head Quarters,  
31<sup>st</sup>. Jan<sup>ry</sup>. 1781

The Guards will relieve the Prov<sup>n</sup>. Guard & Gen<sup>l</sup>. Hosp<sup>l</sup> ditto. No Railing to be burnt on any Ground Whatever but by Express permission.

Head Q<sup>rs</sup>  
31<sup>st</sup>. Jan<sup>ry</sup>. 1781

The Army will be under Arms & ready to March to morrow morning at half past Two O'Clock in Two Columns ; Maj<sup>r</sup>. Gen<sup>l</sup> Leslie will lead the First Column, Consisting of the foll<sup>g</sup>. Corps.

Brigade of Guards	Two Three Pounders
Reg <sup>t</sup> . De Bose.	23 <sup>rd</sup> . Reg <sup>t</sup> .
Half the Pioneers,	L <sup>t</sup> Col Tarlton's Corps

L<sup>t</sup> Col. Webster will give Orders respecting the other Column. The Waggon Horses are to be Harness'd & the Bat Horses Loaded ready to move at ½ past five O'Clock under the Escort of an Off<sup>r</sup>, of the N Carolina Reg<sup>t</sup>.

#### Brigade Orders

Q<sup>r</sup> M<sup>r</sup>. Furnival will be left in Charge of the Baggage, Sick, Convalescents & Women of the Brigade, & will apply at five O'Clock tomorrow morning to L<sup>t</sup> Col Hamilton Com<sup>dg</sup>. Off<sup>r</sup>. of the North Carolina Reg<sup>t</sup>, for other Instructions & will in every respect Consider himself as Responsible for this Charge, & for the Conduct of the Men under his Command. As the Surgeon & all the Mates will March with the Brigade, it is expectd proper Medicines & Dressings are left for the Sick with directions for the Same.

NB : Horses will be apply'd for by Q<sup>r</sup> M<sup>r</sup> Furnival to the Q<sup>r</sup> M<sup>r</sup> Gen<sup>l</sup>, in proper time, for the Conveniency of the Sick (Cornwallis 1781 in Newsome 1932, 3:292).

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#### Note: Bat Horse

A bat horse was an antiquated name for a packhorse or workhorse.

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In Cornwallis's last order, he specified the *order of march* for the regiments that proceeded to Cowan's Ford. Left unspecified were the light-infantry companies who presumably were under his direct command. He also ordered Lieutenant Colonel James Webster to march separately to Beattie's Ford as a diversionary feint. Webster's units were the remainder of those listed earlier: the Yagers, half the Pioneers, Webster's brigade or the 33<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, four six pounders, Regiment of Bose, and North Carolina Volunteers. The baggage wagons were to follow three hours later and follow Webster. Cornwallis later wrote:

Lieut. Colonel Webster was detached with part of the Army and all the Baggage to Beattie's Ford, six miles above McCowan's, where General Davidson was supposed to be posted with 500 Militia and was directed to make every possible demonstration by cannonading and otherwise, of an intention to force a passage there (Cornwallis 1781 in NCSR 1895, XVII:997)

Graham later describe the actions at Beatty's Ford:

Cornwallis placed his remaining force in array on the face of the hill fronting Beattie's Ford; and as soon as the firing commenced at Cowan's Ford, made demonstrations of attacking the post at Beattie's. A company went into the water forty of fifty steps and fired. Four pieces of artillery fired smartly for thirty minutes, and his front lines kept firing by platoons, as in field exercises. It was only a feint, however. (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 295)

The first column of British troops reached Cowan's Ford at daybreak on 1 February. Cornwallis was surprised by the number of fires on the opposite bank. Nonetheless, he decided to risk the crossing because, among other considerations, he had to cross before Greene's entire army arrived. Later, he wrote:

I marched at one in the morning with the Brigade of Guards, Regiment of Bose, 23rd Regiment, 200 Cavalry, and two three pounders, to the ford fixed upon for the real attempt; the morning being very dark and rainy & part of our way through a wood where there was no road, one of the three pounders in front of the 23rd Regiment and the Cavalry, overset in a swamp, and occasioned those Corps to lose the line of march, and some of the Artillery Men belonging to the other Gun, (one of whom had the match) having stopped to assist were likewise left behind. The Head of the Column in the meanwhile, arrived at the bank of the River and day began to break. I could make no use of the Gun that was up and it was evident from the number of fires on the other side, that the opposition would be greater than I had expected. However, as I knew that the Rain that was then falling would soon render the River again impassable, and I had received information the evening before that General Greene had arrived in General Morgan's Camp, and that his Army was marching after him with the greatest expedition, I determined not to desist from the attempt; and therefore, full of confidence in the Zeal & Gallantry of Brigadier O'hara and of the Brigade of Guards under his command, I ordered them to march on, but to prevent confusion, not to fire until they gained the opposite bank. Their behavior justified my high opinion of them; for a constant fire from the enemy, in a ford upwards of five hundred yards wide, in many places up to their middle, with a rocky bottom and strong current made no impression on their cool and determined valor, nor checked their passage. The light Infantry landing first immediately formed, and in a few minutes killed or dispersed everything that appeared before them, the rest of the Troops forming and advancing in succession. We now learned that we had been opposed by about three hundred Militia that had taken post there only the

evening before under the command of General Davidson. Their General and two or three other officers were among the killed, the number of wounded was uncertain, and a few were taken prisoners. (Cornwallis 1781 in NCSR 1895, XVII:997–998)

Brigadier General Charles O’Hara’s unit, the *Brigade of Guards*, led the British across the river and suffered many casualties including many killed whose bodies were swept downstream (Henry 1855 in Schenck 1891, 13).

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**Note: Brigade of Guards**

The Brigade of Guards dates from 1659 and continues to the present. In Britain, it had three regiments: First Guards (later Grenadier Guards), Coldstream Guards, and Third Guards (or Scots Guards). In 1776, for service in North America, selected soldiers from each combined into one regiment of two battalions. It participated in battles at Long Island, White Plains, Fort Mifflin, Red Bank, Germantown, and Fort Mifflin. In January 1781, it joined Earl Cornwallis in the South. On 1 February, it forced the Catawba River crossing. On 15 March, it participated at Guilford Courthouse.

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**Note: Light Infantry Companies**

Light infantry companies were detachments comprised of the swiftness, most active, soldiers drawn from all the regiments. These companies were not fixed long-lasting units like the numbered regiments. However, their officers might serve for as long as they were physically able. These companies were assigned the most dangerous tasks and typically were the first to engage the enemy. It was considered an honor to be chosen by a light-infantry company.

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Battle of Cowan's Ford

Painted by Dan Nance, 2011.

[www.dannance.com](http://www.dannance.com). Used with permission.

Graham later recalled:

[The British] infantry in front with bayonets fixed, muskets empty, carried on the left shoulder at a slope, cartridge box on the same shoulder, and each man had a stick about the size of a hoop pole eight feet long, which he kept setting on the bottom before him, to support him against the rapidity of the current, which was generally waist deep, and in some places more. (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 291)

Private Robert Henry was with the American guard on the opposite bank. He described the night and battle:

When about to start, I gave [John] Nighten a hundred dollar Continental bill for a half a pint of whiskey. My brother gave another bill of the same size for half a bushel of potatoes. We dispatched the whiskey, Being thus equipped, we went to the [Cowan's] Ford, which was about a mile and a half When we arrived, the guard that was there, thirty in number, made us welcome; the officer of the guard told us that Cornwallis would certainly attempt to cross that night or early in the morning; that each one of the guard had picked their stands to annoy the British as they crossed, so that when the alarm was given they would not be crowded, or be in each other's way—and said we must choose our stands. He accompanied us—Charles Rutledge chose the uppermost stand, and I chose the lowest, next the getting out place of the Ford; the officer observed, that he considered that Davidson had done wrong, for that the army should have been stationed at the Ford—instead of which it was encamped three-fourths of a mile off, and that some person acquainted in the neighborhood of Forney should watch

the movements of Cornwallis' army, and immediately when they would attempt to march, to hasten to the river and give the alarm; then that Davidson's army might be in readiness to receive them; the river being in the situation that it was then in, and the army thus prepared to receive them, said that Cornwallis and a million of men could not cross without cannon as long as our ammunition would last. This I thought was a large expression; but since I think he was correct. He mentioned to each man of the guard to go to his stand again and examine it, so that when the alarm was given, that there should be no mistakes then made. I went to mine, and was well pleased with it — for in shooting, if I would miss my first aim, my lead would range along the British army obliquely and still do damage, and that I could stand it until the British would come to a place the water was riffling over a rock, then it would be time to run away. I remember that I looked over the guard to see if there was any person with whom I was acquainted, and found none but Joel Jetton, and my lame school-master, Robert Beatty, with my comrade, Charles Rutledge.

Gen. Joseph Graham's name is mentioned by Wheeler. I was acquainted with him; but he was not there. Shortly after dark a man across the river hooted like an owl, and was answered; a man went to a canoe some distance off, and brought word from him that all was silent in the British camp. The guard all lay down with their guns in their arms, and all were sound asleep at day-break, except Joel Jetton, who discovered the noise of horses in deep water. The British pilot, Dick Beal being deceived by our fires, had led them into swimming water. Jetton ran to the Ford, the sentry being sound asleep, Jetton kicked him into the river, endeavored to fire his gun, but it was wet: Having discovered the army, ran to our fires, having a fine voice, cried "the British! the British!" and fired a gun—then each man ran to his stand; when I got to my stand, I saw them red, but thought from loss of sleep my eyes might be mistaken, threw water into them; by the time I was ready to fire, the rest of the guard had fired. I then heard the British splashing and making a noise as if drowning. I fired, and continued firing until I saw that one on horse-back had passed my rock in the river, and saw that it was Dick Beal moving his gun from his shoulder, I expected, to shoot me. I ran with all speed up the bank, and when at the top of it, William Polk's horse breasted me, and Gen. Davidson's horse, about twenty or thirty feet before Polk's horse, and near to the water's edge. All being silent on both sides, I heard the report of a gun, at the water's edge, being the first gun fired on the British side, and which I thought Dick Beal had fired at me. That moment Polk wheeled his horse, and cried "fire away, boys; there is help at hand." (Henry 1855 in Schenck 1891, 9–11)

Rather than Dick Beal, the guide was probably Frederick Hager, a Tory who later self-deported himself from North Carolina to evade retribution (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 292) (Nixon 1902, 10–14) (W. A. Graham 1904b, 304). Lieutenant Colonel Francis Hall, while leading the light infantry of the Brigade of Guards across the river, was shot and instantly killed. O'Hara's horse was shot and rolled over in the river. Cornwallis's horse was shot in the river and fell on reaching the opposite embankment

(Stedman 1794, 329). Three days later, Cornwallis described the crossing in correspondence to Lieutenant Colonel Francis Rawdon:

We passed the Catawba on the 1st: at a private Ford four miles below Beatty's: The Guards behaved Gallantly, & although they were fired upon during the whole time of their passing, by some Militia under General Davidson, never returned a Shot until they got out of the River & formed. General Davidson was killed, & his Militia routed; Genl. Leslie's Horse fell with him in the River, & bruised him very much. On the same day Tarleton attack'd a considerable body of Militia under Pickens, killed several, took some Prisoners, & dispersed the rest. ... Your Friends are all well. Colo. Hall was killed at the passage of the Catawba, no other Officer hurt. (Carleton 1747–1783, 28:3317)

Davidson's militiamen, who were stationed at the exit of the horse ford, quickly assembled and moved towards the wagon ford exit. Graham's cavalymen arrived first, dismounted and took a position on the high embankment and began firing on the British in the river (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 292). Lieutenant Colonel Francis Hall, of the Brigade of Guards, was shot or killed under his collapsing horse. Graham later described the disciplined British emergence from the river:

The enemy kept steadily on, notwithstanding our fire was well maintained. As each section reached the shore, they dropped their poles and brought their muskets and cartridge boxes to their proper places, faced to the left, and moved up the narrow strip of low ground, to make room for the succeeding section, which moved on in the same manner. By the time the front rank got twenty or thirty steps up the river, they had loaded their pieces and began to fire up the bank. (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 293)



Battle of Cowan's Ford  
Painted by David Teague.

When Davidson’s militia infantry arrived, he ordered Graham to remount his cavalymen and move 200 yards to the rear to guard against a possible British cavalry attack (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 293). More British units crossed and established a lodgment on the eastern bank that extended 500 feet (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 293). Graham later wrote:

The rear of their [British] infantry and the front of their cavalry was about the middle of the river when the bugle sounded on their left, on which their fire slackened and near ceased (they were loading their pieces). In about a minute it sounded again, when their whole line from the ford branch advanced up the bank, with their arms at trail. The hill was in many places so steep that they had to pull up by the brushes. (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 293–294)

Davidson ordered a retreat for 100 yards. Under intense fire, he ordered his men to take protection behind trees (Henry 1855 in Schenck 1891, 9–11). At this moment, Davidson was killed instantly by a ball. Disorder seized the Americans who dispersed in small groups (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 294). Graham later wrote:

two of his [Graham’s cavalry] 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).

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**Note: Who shot and killed Davidson?**

To ascertain how Davidson was killed requires a trace of assertions and their dependences.

Id	Time Asserted	Assertion	Source	Asserter	Creditability
A		Only shooter could have known with high reliability.		No claim	
B	Before 1827	Davidson killed by rifle not musket ball. Hence not British.		Unknown. Presumably American, maybe Wilson.	Low. Who would or could tell the difference from a wound?
C	Before 1827	Davidson’s body removed to Hopewell Presbyterian	Wilson	Wilson family tradition	Moderate
D	1794	Tory guide abandoned British mid-stream. No mention of who killed	Presumably British soldier(s) eyewitness.	Stedman	Moderate.

		Davidson.			
E	1827	Davidson shot by Frederick Hager as only one with rifle.	B	Graham, Joseph	Tradition. Present. Ordered away by Davidson a few minutes before. Not an eyewitness.
F	1859	Davidson shot by British volley.	Henry	Henry	High. Present. near Davidson.
G	1902	Davidson shot by Hager	E	Nixon	Tradition
H	1904	Davidson shot by Hager	E	Graham, Alexander	Tradition

Joseph Graham was in the battle. Although he conversed with Davidson, Graham did not later claim to have eye witnessed Davidson being shot. In 1827, Graham stated as tradition that that Frederick Hager shot Davidson on the circumstantial evidence that Davidson’s wound was caused by a rifle ball and Hager was the only one within the British vanguard who had a rifle. On the other hand, Henry was near Davidson and indicated that Davidson was shot in a British volley. The latter presumes far less. Furthermore, Henry was both the source and asserter. After the war, Hager, because of his Tory sympathies, became a target for retribution and may have been falsely accused of killing Davidson (Nixon 1902, 10–14).

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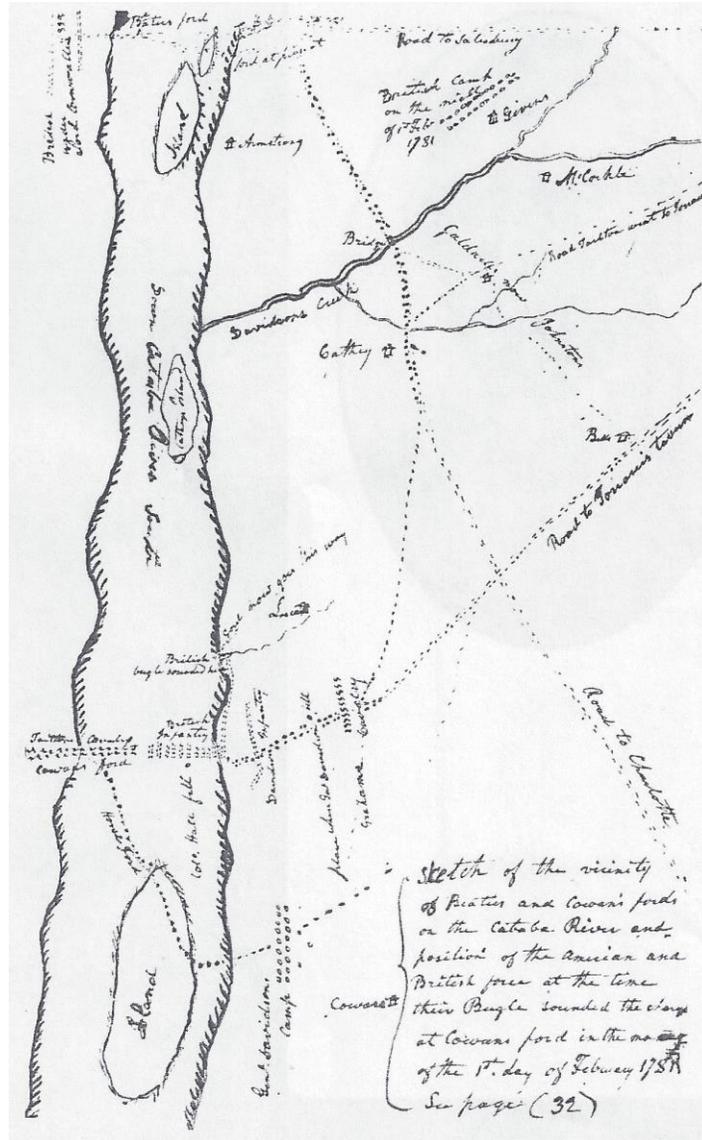
Cornwallis reported his casualties:

On our side Lieut. Colonel Hall and three men were killed and thirty-six wounded, all of the Light Infantry, and Grenadiers of the Guards. (Cornwallis 1781 in NCSR 1895, XVII:998)

However, the next day, Robert Henry found additional British bodies:

It was proposed that we would go to James Cunningham's fish-trap, and see if there were any fish in it. When we arrived at the trap, there were fourteen dead men lodged in it, several of whom appeared to have no wound, but had drowned. We pushed them into the water, they floated off, and went each to his own home. (Henry 1855 in Schenck 1891, 13)

About 1821, Joseph Graham drew a sketch of the ford and battleground. This evidence is significant because Graham participated in the battle and understood the importance of representing it correctly. It is the best evidence for the locating the historical ford and battleground.



Sketch of Cowan's Ford battle by Joseph Graham, drawn about 1821  
 North Carolina State Archives, Map Collection, Division of Archives and History  
 (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 288) (Graham 1827 in Rankin 1976)

The large island on this sketch is believed to be the same island present today. No doubt, Graham drew this sketch with serious intent since he lived nearby, probably passed this location frequently, and was an accomplished citizen and brigadier general concerned about recording history accurately. His sketch can be compared with a modern satellite map that shows a dam crosses Cowan's Ford immediately south of the McGuire Nuclear Power Station.



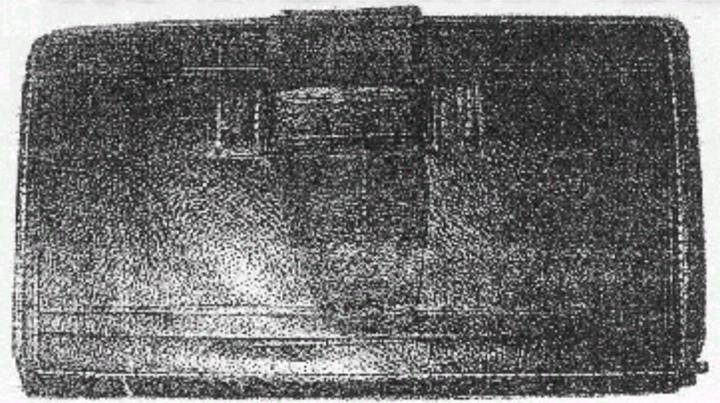
Cowan's Ford Battleground Area (Google Maps 2017)

The proportion of Graham's island's width to river width matches well the present-day island width. If the walking ford was approximately half an island's length upstream, then the historical Cowan's Ford, where the British crossed, was approximately at or just below where the dam is today. Not surprisingly, the dam's name is Cowan's Ford Dam. Exposed bedrock that made a natural shoal and a good ford also makes a good foundation for a heavy dam.

Paul Walters, surveyor in 1959 for *Duke Power Company*, indicates that he was told the historical Cowan's Ford crossed the island and then up the embankment near the present-day powerline cut. This ford was probably the "horse ford" marked on Graham's sketch. However, all descriptions of the British crossing do not mention traversing an island.

Since 1781, the name Cowan's Ford was applied to several physical fords. This has led to ambiguity on finding the location of the British crossing and battleground. Graham's 1821 sketch map indicated that the ford used at that time was farther upstream than the British crossing. Later maps from 1888, 1911, and 1949 showed Cowan's Ford farther downstream, on the 1949 map, near the present-day Highway NC73 bridge.

Davidson was killed at Cowan's Ford possibly by Tory guide Frederick Hager's rifle shot (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 294). 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 carried to England and ultimately stored in a British archive where it remained in obscurity until 1964 when rediscovered by Davidson's biographer Chalmers G. Davidson.

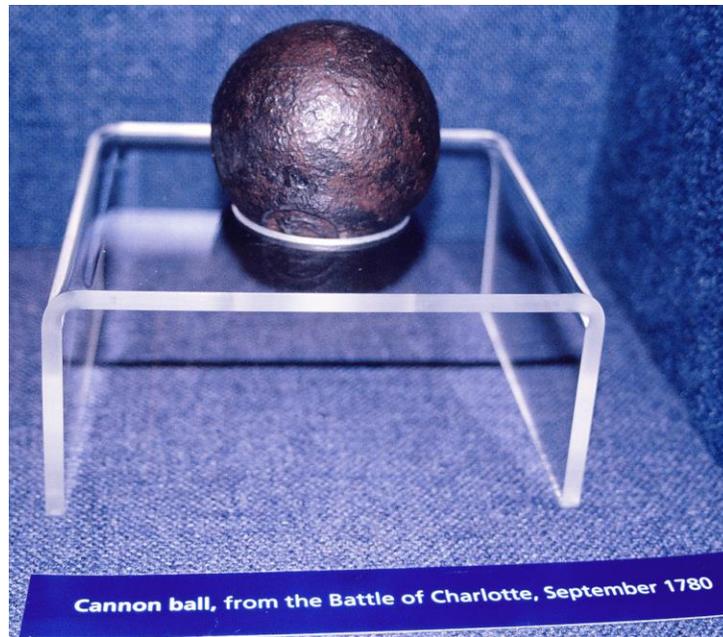


William Lee Davidson's Wallet

The battle noise was heard throughout the region, causing widespread panic. Graham reported:

The report of the artillery and platoons at Beattie's came down the river like repeated peals of thunder, as though it was within a mile, and was heard over the country to a distance of twenty-five miles. Although it had no effect on our troops engaged at Cowan's (for they acted well under the circumstances), yet it had a wonderful effect on the people on the adjacent country. Hitching up their teams in great haste, and packing up their most valuable goods and some means of substance, the men who were not in service and the women and children abandoned their homes and drove off in different directions. In one hour after the firing, the whole country appeared in motion, but unfortunately too many of them fled into the Salisbury road. (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 295–296)

In 1893, two cannonballs and two bombshells were found near Cowan's Ford. In 1894, John R. Schenck gave the cannonballs to the University of North Carolina Archives (Archive Entry Logbook 1894). One of these cannonballs is now on display in the Visitor's Center at the Guilford Courthouse National Military Park. This cannonball and Davidson's wallet are the only known artifacts from the battle.



Cannonball found near Cowan's Ford in 1893  
Guilford Courthouse National Battlefield Park  
Misabeled as in the Battle of Charlotte

About mid-morning 1 February, when word of the defeat reached Greene at Oliphant's Mill, he ordered a retreat. He also wrote about the change of plans to Major General Isaac Huger, Colonel Charles McDowell, and Colonel Elijah Clarke (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:231–232). Morgan swiftly departed with his Continental Army light infantry, plus Washington's cavalry and the Virginia riflemen, for Salisbury. Sergeant Major William Seymour, of the Delaware Continentals, wrote:

We remained on this ground [Sherrill's Ford] till the first February, waiting the motion of the enemy, who this day crossed the river lower down than where we lay, and coming unawares on the militia commanded by Genl. Davidson, on which ensued a smart skirmish in which General Davidson was killed, and a great many more killed and wounded, upon which the militia retreated off in great disorder. We marched off this place for Salisbury on the evening of the first February, and continued our march all night in a very unpleasant condition, it having rained incessantly all night, which rendered the roads almost inaccessible. (Seymour 1781 in Seymour 1883, 295)

Later, Lieutenant Colonel John Eager Howard recalled:

Morgan did not leave the river until 10 or 11 o'clock on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February after it was known that the enemy had crossed and that Davidson had been defeated; then it was that Genl. Greene ordered the retreat. We marched all night in the rain & mud, and a most fatiguing march it was. We arrived at Colonel Locks 4 miles short of Salisbury at sun rise on the 2<sup>nd</sup> & halted to get dry and for the men who had fallen out of the ranks from fatigue, to come up. (Howard 1822)

While in route, Greene paused at David Carr's plantation to await any militiamen from the fords. He knew that Morgan's Continental Army Light Infantry was only a few hours ahead of Cornwallis's army. That evening, he wrote Major General Isaac Huger to, if possible, force march to Salisbury, otherwise to march up the east side of the Yadkin River.

The enemy crossed the Catawba this morning at M'Cowen's Ford, about seventeen miles below this, a little after break of day; they burnt a great number of their waggons yesterday, and seem to be preparing for forced marches. The militia is to assemble at Mr. David Carr's, where I shall remain to-night. I think the enemy will push for Salisbury; and from the rapidity with which they march will reach it in little better than a day, especially as we have little force to retard their march. If you have crossed the Yadkin and are in a condition to force a march, push for Salisbury. If not [in a condition to force a march for Salisbury], recross and come up the other side. And if you have not already crossed the river, move up the east side of the Yadkin. To have the baggage and stores secured is the next great object to the salvation of the troops. Let them be sent to Guilford, notwithstanding the order to transport it to the ford near Salisbury. Give orders to the waggon-master-general, or commanding officer of the guard with the baggage and stores, to impress all the horses they may require to hasten the march. Let the officers keep as little baggage with them as possible, as they may stand a great chance of losing it upon forced marches. Send orders to Lee to move up with his horse and leave his infantry in the rear to follow. Had we a superiority in horse the militia would be useful, but for want of it, they dare not go within miles of the enemy. Give orders to Colonel Wade, to have all his hogs collected at Rocky River driven off towards Guilford. (Johnson 1822, 1:422)

After crossing Cowan's Ford and dispersing the American defenders, Cornwallis ordered Tarleton's cavalry and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment to pursue the escapist militiamen. Probably during early afternoon, Tarleton continued to Torrence's Tavern. Later, Cornwallis wrote:

I detached Lieut. Colonel Tarleton with the Cavalry and 23rd Regiment to pursue the routed Militia. A few were soon killed or taken and Lieut. Colonel Tarleton having learned that 3 or 400 of the neighboring Militia were to assemble that day at Tarrant's house, about ten miles from the ford. Leaving his Infantry he went on with the Cavalry and finding the Militia as expected, he with excellent conduct and great spirit, attacked them instantly and totally routed them, with little loss on his side; and on theirs between forty and fifty killed, wounded or prisoners. This stroke with our passage at the Ford so effectually dispirited the Militia that we met with no further opposition on our march to the Yadkin, through one of the most rebellious tracts in America. (Cornwallis 1781 in NCSR 1895, XVII:998)

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)

Unknown to Tarleton, he was about 7 miles away from capturing Greene at David Carr's house (Johnson 1822, 1:416).

During the battle, Lieutenant Colonel James Webster with the 33<sup>rd</sup> Regiment and all the baggage wagons remained on the west side of Beattie's Ford. After the British secured the opposite bank, these units crossed, a process that took the remainder of the day.

Rebels having quitted Beattie's Ford, Lieut. Colonel Webster was passing his detachment and the Baggage of the Army, this had become tedious and difficult by the continuance of the rain and the swelling of the River, but all joined us soon after dark, about six miles from Beattie's Ford. (Cornwallis 1781 in NCSR 1895, XVII:998–999)

On the evening of 1 February, Davidson's body was recovered by Richard Barry and David Wilson (Sommerville 1939, 196, 253). Since the presence of British troops made it impossible to move his body to his home church Centre Presbyterian Church, his body was buried in Hopewell Presbyterian Church Cemetery.



William Lee Davidson Grave  
Hopewell Presbyterian Church Cemetery, 1920

After Davidson death, on about 11 February, the field officers of the Salisbury District militia temporarily placed themselves under the command of Brigadier General Andrew Pickens (Graham 1827 in W. A. Graham 1904b, 203) who had been recently promoted on 25 January for his conduct at Cowpens. Major Joseph Dickson, who commanded Lincoln County cavalymen, joined Pickens.

In 1959, Paul Walters rediscovered the neglected Davidson monument erected in 1923 by E. L. Baxter Davidson. It was located near the top of embankment about 1500 feet from the river.



Brigadier General William Lee Davidson Monument  
Erected by E. L. Baxter Davidson, 1923, and moved 1959 and 1971.

On 17 May 1931, the *Charlotte Observer* published an article about this monument and the condition of the old road.

#### Where Davidson Fell

As the British reached the shore they filed off to the left and loaded their pieces, beginning a brisk fire upon the Americans. When a sufficient number had crossed [the Catawba River] they loaded their muskets and crept the bluff, dragging their muskets behind them. Perceiving this the Americans fell back, but when the British reached the top of the bluff they delivered such a heavy fire upon the Americans that they were forced to fall back even further. General William Davidson was shot through the heart with a bullet from a small caliber rifle, believed to have been fired by the British guide who lived near the river, Frederick Hager, a Tory

The spot where General Davidson fell is now designated by a large stone marker with a bronze tablet on it, erected by E. L. Baxter Davidson, great-grandson of Major John Davidson [owner of Rural Hill], kinsman of the general's. The marker is partly surrounded by briars and is very difficult to find, because it is just off the old, abandoned road that led to the ford.

This old road is rather picturesque. It enters the woods about three hundred yards above the river and goes down toward the river with the high bluffs rising gradually on the right and the deep ravine dropping off on the left. The road is sunken deep with the wear of many years of use, and although abandoned for more than 15 years no vegetation yet has had the hardihood to grow where the feet of thousands of travelers, horses and the soldiers of the king tramped. On each side of the road big hickory trees rise and during the fall the ground is littered by the shells dropped by the squirrels.

On the main Beatty's Ford road is another stone marker erected by E. L. Baxter Davidson pointing the way toward the ford. (Adams 1931)

Beginning about 1959 when the Cowan's Ford Dam was planned, Duke Power collected information about historical sites that would be inundated by the new lake. Many graveyards were relocated. Some archeology may have been conducted near the dam site. If any battle artifacts were discovered, they are not commonly known about among Mecklenburg County historians and were not mentioned in the dedication of a new monument in 1971 (Pierce 1971).

On 1 February 1971, Duke Power President William Bulgin McGuire officiated at the 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)

#### Order of Battle

At the time of the battle, sunrise on 1 February 1781, the order of battle was:

### *British Forces, Lieutenant General Charles Earl Cornwallis*

At Beattie's Ford:

- Webster's Brigade, Lieutenant Colonel James Webster, 234
- 33<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, Captain Frederick Cornwallis, 234
- British Legion, 160
  - Infantry Battalion, Captain Lochlan McDonald, 160
- Jaegers, Captain Wilhelm Friedrich von Roeder, 84
- Royal North Carolina Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel John Hamilton, 120
- Royal Artillery, 36
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Section, Lieutenant John McLeod, 18, 6-pounders, 2
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Section, Lieutenant Augustus O'Hara, 18, 6-pounders, 2
- Half the Corps of Pioneers
- Baggage wagons

At Cowan's Ford:

- Brigade of Guards, Brigadier General Charles O'Hara, 690
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Chapple Norton, 170
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel James Stuart, 170
  - Guards Light Infantry Company, Captain John Goodricke, 80
  - Guards Grenadier Company, Captain William Home, 80
- Webster's Brigade, 238
  - 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, Captain Thomas Peter, 238
- Leslie's Brigade, Major General Alexander Leslie, 565
  - 71<sup>st</sup> Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Captain Robert Hutcheson, 244
  - Regiment von Bose, Major Johann Du Buy, 321
- British Legion, Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, 160
  - Cavalry Battalion, Captain David Kinlock, 160
- Royal Artillery, 12
  - Royal Artillery, 3<sup>rd</sup> Section, Lieutenant John Smith, 12, 3-pounders, 2
- Half the Corps of Pioneers

### *American Forces, Brigadier General William Lee Davidson*

At Island Ford:

- South Carolina Militia, Brigadier General Andrew Pickens, 200

At Sherrill's Ford:

- Continental Army Light Infantry, Brigadier General Daniel Morgan, 300

At Beattie's Ford:

- Orange County Militia, Colonel Thomas Farmer, 200

At Cowan's Ford:

- Western (Salisbury) NC District Militia, Brigadier General William Lee Davidson
  - Mecklenburg County Militia, Lieutenant Thomas Davidson, 20
  - Mecklenburg County Militia, Major William Polk, 100
  - Mecklenburg County Militia Cavalrymen, Captain Joseph Graham, 50
  - Rowan County Militia, Colonel Francis Locke, 100

At Toole's Ford:

- Mecklenburg County Militia, Captain Jonathan Potts, 70

At Tuckasegee Ford:

- Surry County Militia, Colonel John Williams, 200
- Lincoln County Militia, Major John Carruth, 60

### **2–5 February 1781, Withdrawal to Trading Ford, Salisbury**

From the Catawba River both armies probably traveled the ridge road towards Salisbury and Trading Ford. Today, that road follows the shoreline of Lake Norman to Cornelius, joins Statesville Road, NC115, to north of Mooresville, continues on Mazeppa Road and Rowan Mills Road, NC801, to US29 and Salisbury.

Until early morning on 2 February 1781, Major General Nathanael Greene remained at David Carr's house:

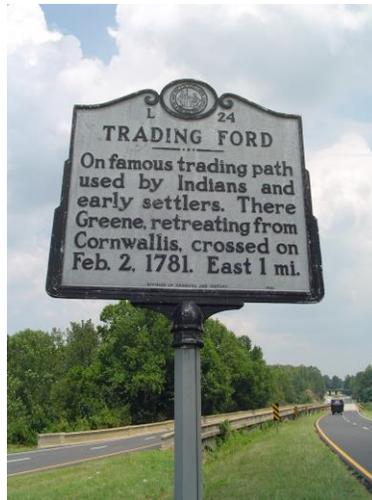
I waited that night at the place appointed for the Militia to collect at untill morning, but not a man appeared. (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, 7:266)

Later that day in Salisbury, Greene joined the army of Brigadier General Daniel Morgan. He ordered Major General Isaac Huger to march the main Continental Army directly to Guilford Courthouse (Johnson 1822, 1:422). That evening, Greene is alleged to have visited the tavern of Elizabeth Maxwell Steele who offered her gold and silver coins for the American cause.



Major General Nathanael Greene at Elizabeth Steele's Tavern, Salisbury, North Carolina  
Artist unknown.

The next day, it marched to Trading Ford on the Yadkin River. The river water was high and un-fordable. But Greene had anticipated such problems two months before. On 3 February, boats ferried his 1800 men and supplies to the east side. During this operation, a rear guard of 100 Virginia riflemen and North Carolina militiamen, positioned a half mile back, turned back a vanguard of 800 British. On 4 February, Cornwallis's 2100-man army arrived at Trading Ford as the American army began its march towards Guilford Courthouse. Without boats, The British could not attack. They set up artillery pieces on the bluff called *Heights of Gowerie* and shelled the opposite shore with no effect. Today, Trading Ford can be seen as the island to the east while driving across highway I85 bridge over Yadkin River.



Trading Ford historical marker.  
Greene's army crossed on 3 February 1781

On 15 August 1832, John Moore of Rowan County [testified](#) how the Americans disabled the boats at Trading Ford:

General Morgan came to his father's in person being an old acquaintance of his father; when he states he joined General Morgan and was attached to Captain Washington's Company of General Morgan's Riflemen, he states he was marched on with General Morgan and belonged to the Regiment at the battle of the Cowpens – he states he was attached to the guard who guarded the prisoners from the Cowpens to the Yadkin River at the old trading ford, he states that at that place the Americans sunk the flatboat by boring holes through her bottom after the prisoners were set out and waiting [sic, weighing] her down with rocks; he states that the British who were in pursuit of them made their appearance on the opposite bank of the river in a short time, he states it was in the night, and bright moonlight, and at the place Morgan formed his men for action and gave his men to understand that from the superior numbers of the Enemy, he after giving them one or two discharges from their rifles he General Morgan would necessarily have to retreat. (Moore 1832)

Although having lost at Cowan's Ford and withdrawing, Greene planned future actions. On 3 February, he wrote to Baron von Steuben:

If the Enemy distress us in this State, I am not without hopes of giving them trouble in their rear; and Shall take measures to this purpose, with Generals Sumter, Marion and Pickens. O that we had in the field as Henry the Fifth said, some few of the many thousands that are Idle at Home. I am dear Baron

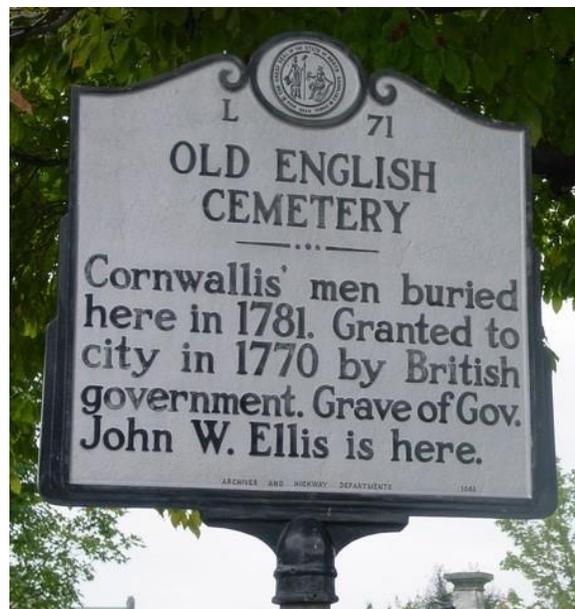
Your Most Obedt humble Sr  
Nath Greene (Greene 1781 in PGNG 1997, VII:243)

This revealed something of Greene's mindset. Although under extreme stress, he formed an analogy from literature by paraphrasing from William Shakespeare's [King Henry V, Act IV, Scene iii](#): Earl of Westmorland: "O that we now had here but one ten thousand of those men in England that do no work to-day!"

On 4 February, Greene, in a letter to Huger, summarized Cornwallis's options:

How is it possible, that an army, circumstanced as our's is, can make head against one organized and equipped as Lord Cornwallis'? Is it possible to guard against every misfortune with a force so inferior? If Lord Cornwallis knows his true interest, he will pursue our army. If he can disperse that, he completes the reduction of this state, and without that, he will do nothing to effect. (Johnson 1822, 1:413–421)

From Trading Ford, Cornwallis's army backtracked 7 miles to Salisbury and waited for the river level to subside. While there, British soldiers, perhaps some wounded at Cowan's Ford, were buried in what was later called *Old English Cemetery*. Graves almost certainly included British prisoners who died while being held in Salisbury since 1780.



Old English Cemetery  
Salisbury, North Carolina

## Conclusion

The Battle of Cowan's Ford was the beginning of the Race to the Dan River in which Greene's army 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 on the Saturday closest to

1 February, 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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