

240th Anniversary of the Battle of Cowan's Ford

On Saturday, January 30, 2021, the Virginia Society, OFPA was represented in a virtual ceremony celebrating the 240th Anniversary at the Battle at Cowan's Ford in North Carolina. The event was hosted for the National Society, Sons of the American Revolution by the Mecklenburg Chapter, North Carolina SAR. Well over 200 participants from around the country, including, among others, Washington state and Texas, were at the Zoom Meeting. Our Virginia Society Governor Michael E. Weyler gave greetings during the opening ceremonies, and subsequently presented our society wreath.



Governor Weyler, Virginia Society, the Order of the Founders and Patriots of America

The prelude to the Battle of Cowan's Ford on February 1, 1781 was the Battle of Cowpens fifteen days earlier on January 17. At Cowpens, American General Daniel Morgan had defeated Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton's Green Dragoons. As a result of that key American victory, British General Cornwallis began his intense pursuit of General Nathanael Green and America's southern army. A barrier to that pursuit was the Catawba River.

On February 1, 1781, after being held up for three days on the west side of the swollen Catawba river, Cornwallis ordered his army across the river at Cowan's Ford. The Mecklenburg County militia under General Davidson had about 200 men on the east side of the ford to oppose the several thousand British infantry and cavalry. While General Davidson was killed in that action, the British paid a heavy price for their successful crossing at Cowan's Ford, which further slowed Cornwallis' pursuit of Greene's army.



Tarleton's remaining Green Dragoons crossing the Catawba under fire from Patriot Militia.

The Battle of Cowan's Ford on February 1st was the beginning of what we now refer to as the Race to the Dan, at the end of which Greene's army successfully crossed the Dan River to safety on February 14, less than a day ahead of an exhausted Cornwallis.

From the Dan, Cornwallis then moved eastward where, on March 15 at Guilford Courthouse, he engaged Greene's army again. Although Cornwallis held the field at the end of that battle, his army was now so decimated, that he abandoned his pursuit of Greene, and headed to Yorktown, Virginia, and relief.

That relief was denied him by the French Fleet blocking the British Fleet, and after a long siege by Washington's army at Yorktown, Cornwallis surrendered on October 19, 1781, thus ending major hostilities in the American Revolution.

While the Battle at Cowan's Ford may be considered a minor battle won by the British, it was a pivotal action in the string of engagements that led to the ultimate defeat of Cornwallis at Yorktown.