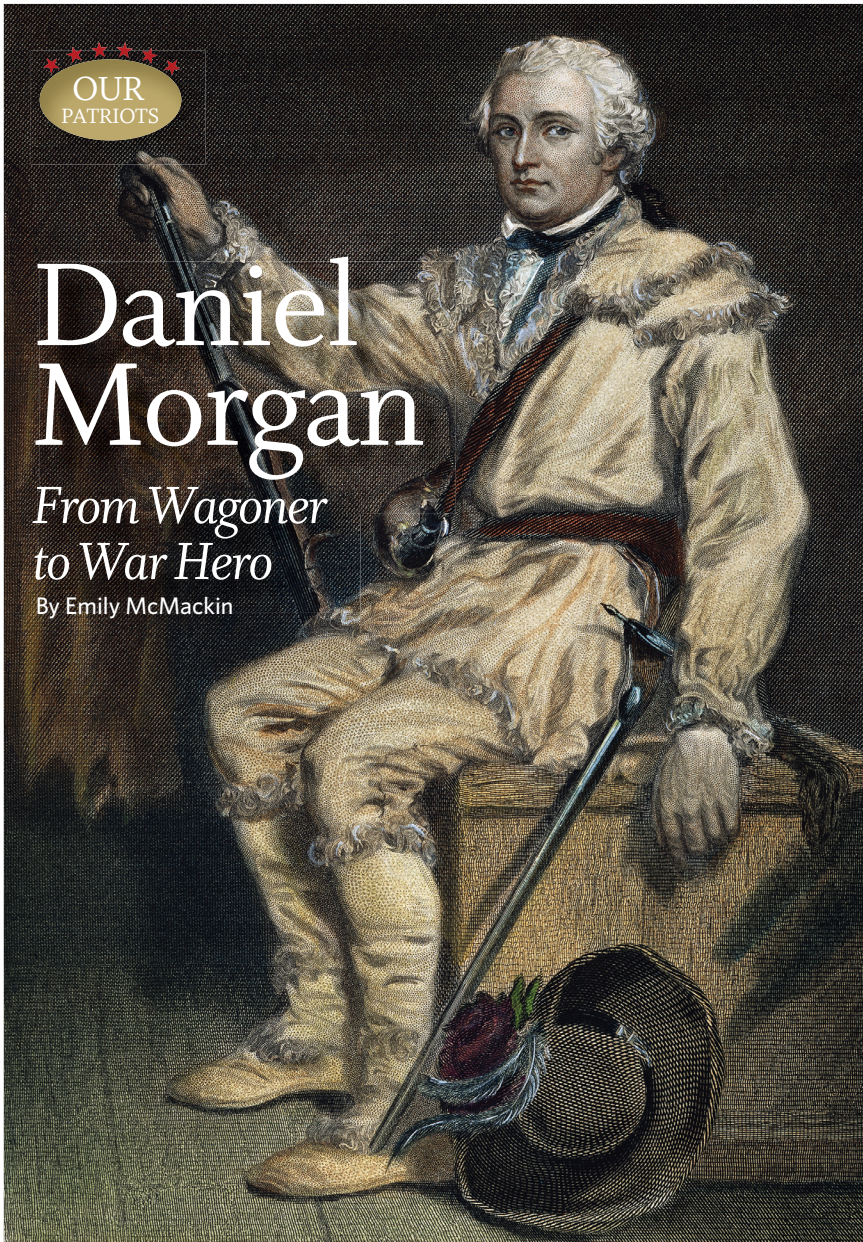


OUR
PATRIOTS

Daniel Morgan

From Wagoner
to War Hero

By Emily McMackin



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wherever he comes.”*

— A SOLDIER’S ACCOUNT FROM THE
BATTLE OF QUEBEC

such as John Hancock, and feared for their ability to deliver unexpected and lethal blows to the British.

Though he was famous for his temper and frequent bursts of emotion, Morgan’s jovial nature endeared him to his men. His presence struck both hope and horror in soldiers, depending on which side they fought. As one soldier recounted of Morgan during the Battle of Quebec: “Betwixt every peal, the awful voice of Morgan is heard, whose gigantic stature and terrible appearance carries dismay among the foe wherever he comes.”

Life on the Frontier

Morgan was born to Welsh parents in 1735 or 1736 in Hunterdon County, N.J., but spent most of his life in Winchester, Va., a frontier village that served as the seat of Frederick County. Arriving there in the spring of 1753, the husky teenager brought few belongings and an air of mystery with him. He revealed little about his past, but supposedly left home without telling anyone after a contentious argument with his father.

Morgan had spent months wandering on foot along the Great Wagon Road—a trail running from Pennsylvania to North Carolina traversed by thousands looking to settle on cheap land in the Appalachian Valley. Traveling through Pennsylvania and Maryland, he worked odd jobs along the way before crossing the Potomac River and finding a home in northwestern Virginia. The rowdy town of Winchester, known for its taverns and brawls, suited his rough manners and rural upbringing.

Brigadier General Daniel Morgan might not be well-known today, but he became a legend to the Patriots who fought with him during the American Revolution. Known as the “Old Wagoner” to veterans who served with him during the French and Indian War, Morgan grew up in the backwoods of America and became one of its most skilled and natural fighters. The tall, brawny man with the boisterous bellow did not shy away from combat, as evidenced by the scars on his face from brushes with bullets. He fought in some of the most difficult campaigns of the war—the invasion of Canada, Saratoga and Cowpens—yet his bravery and accomplishments in these battles have dimmed in the American memory over time.

During the Revolution, Morgan and his marksmen were highly esteemed, viewed as the “secret weapon” by statesmen

Despite his lack of education and reputation for carousing, Morgan impressed locals with his work ethic. He did such a good job helping a farmer prepare his land for planting that the man promoted him to foreman of his sawmill. He soon left that job to drive supply wagons across the Appalachian Mountains for higher pay. Thriving on the adventure of wagoning, Morgan saved most of his salary and within a year bought his own team so he could enter the business for himself.

Joining Braddock's Expedition

Morgan's career as a wagoner took an unexpected turn as the French began moving into the Ohio Valley and rousing the British to strengthen its defenses in the disputed territory. In 1755, Major-General Edward Braddock arrived in Virginia with two regiments of regulars, prompting Lieutenant Governor Robert Dinwiddie to put out a call for teamsters to transport provisions to Braddock's advance base at Maryland's Fort Cumberland. Morgan volunteered and soon found himself in service when Braddock discovered he needed

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more wagoners to accompany his army to frontier forts.

Royal officers, accustomed to strict obedience from their troops, looked down on the teamsters for their tendency to gamble, drink too much, flirt with American Indian women and spar among themselves and with soldiers. The men faced stiff penalties for causing disorder as Morgan learned all too well during one expedition. After irritating a British lieutenant who struck him with his sword, Morgan retaliated, knocking the officer out with a single blow. Court-martialed and sentenced to 500 lashes, he claimed to have retained consciousness during the beating and heard the drummer miscount, receiving only 499 lashes, but "did not think it worthwhile to tell him of his mistake and let it go so!"

Morgan drove one of the supply wagons during Braddock's expedition to attack the French-held Fort Duquesne near present-day Philadelphia. Due to heavy forests and treacherous mountain ridges not marked on the map, the supply train and Colonel Thomas Dunbar's rear guard fell miles behind the regular force. The attack did not go as planned, and the French

and American Indians ambushed Braddock's troops before they could reach the fort. The defeat was disastrous; the general and more than half his force were killed.

Miles away from the massacre, Morgan watched as fleeing survivors ran up to meet the supply train, and the young Virginia militia Colonel George Washington galloped up with orders for Col. Dunbar. He assisted with the hasty retreat, destroying flour, ammunition and gunpowder to make room for the wounded.

Brushes With Combat and Monotony

Afterward, Morgan joined one of the Virginia ranger companies authorized by the Colonial Assembly to help protect the frontier from encroaching attacks by American Indian allies of the French. On the way back from leading a militia contingent through the backcountry near Winchester in 1786, Morgan



British General Edward Braddock marches to Fort Duquesne during the French and Indian War. Morgan drove one of the supply wagons.

and his escort were ambushed by a group of American Indians who opened fire, killing his companion and wounding him. The bullet tore through the back of Morgan's neck, knocking out several teeth before exiting his cheek. While the enemy began scalping their victim, Morgan made his escape, pursued by one American Indian who, according to his telling, hurled his tomahawk at him but missed.

As the British regained control of the frontier and tensions eased, Morgan returned to wagoning. Without combat to keep him engaged, he looked to drinking, card playing and horse racing for entertainment. Frequent brawls got him summoned to court on more than one occasion, but charges were usually dismissed. Meeting the pious teenage Abigail Bailey changed

his wild ways. He settled down with her, renting land to farm and buying a house. Their union produced two daughters, Betsy and Nancy, and they finally married in 1773.

Morgan struggled to support his family with farming, but excelled as a leader. He was appointed several times to supervise the maintenance of county roads, and local officials secured his appointment as militia captain in 1771. During his tenure as captain, he helped lead raids on Indian villages in the Ohio River Valley—part of a conflict that came to be known as Lord Dunmore’s War.

Taking Up the Patriot Cause

Nearing 40 years old, Morgan found himself swept back into combat once again as discontent toward the British grew and the first shots of the Revolution were fired. With hostilities heating up, the Second Continental Congress voted to raise 10 companies of expert riflemen to fight the British from behind the main lines. Legislators called on Frederick County to provide a company, and locals unanimously elected Morgan to serve as its captain for his “courage, conduct and reverence for liberty.” He rode through the Shenandoah Valley every morning looking for the best marksmen to join the company, inciting them with rhetoric about glory and the rights of man and signing up 96 recruits in less than a week.

Morgan’s men were skilled hunters and American Indian fighters with keen instincts and the stamina to survive long periods in harsh elements with few provisions. Along with a long-range rifle, known for its speed and accuracy, each man carried a tomahawk and a scalping knife. Instead of uniforms, Morgan and his marksmen wore traditional hunting gear, including long fringed shirts, leather leggings and moccasins—practical gear that “set them apart as the first of America’s Special Forces,” writes Jack Kelly in *Band of Giants: The Amateur Soldiers Who Won America’s Independence* (St. Martin’s Press, 2014).

When Washington revealed plans to invade Canada in September 1775, Morgan and his men were among the first to volunteer and were chosen by lot to join the expedition, along with two Pennsylvania companies. General Benedict Arnold gave Morgan command over all of the rifle units and relied on him to blaze the trail for the rest of the force as the expedition moved through Maine and into Canada. Morgan kept his men focused and in good spirits as they navigated rough, stormy waters on the treacherous journey up the Kennebec River and trudged through muddy bogs and swamps. The riflemen braved severe cold and extreme hunger as months wore on, eating whatever they could find to survive when their rations ran out. Weakened by malnutrition but stoic, Morgan moved back and forth among his men assuring them that relief would come soon.

When they finally arrived in Canada, Morgan and his riflemen found themselves at the center of the action as the Patriots prepared to surround and capture the

British-occupied city of Quebec during a December 30 snowstorm. While General Richard Montgomery and his men led an ill-fated attack on the south side of the city, Arnold and his troops entered from the north. Advancing through the Lower Town under heavy fire from Redcoats stationed along the walls above them, the men encountered a barricade, and while attempting to take it, Arnold was shot in the ankle. Morgan ran toward the barricade, placing a ladder against it. As he mounted the ladder, musket fire tore through his hat and scorched his face, knocking him back. Enraged, he scaled the ladder again, leaping over the barricade and striking his back on a cannon. His riflemen swarmed over the barricade after him, sending Quebec defenders fleeing in panic.

The Patriots chased the enemy through the city, but the narrow twisting streets and their dampened gunpowder hampered their pursuit. Morgan urged the men on, but was overruled by superiors who decided to wait for Montgomery to arrive with reinforcement. As the British defenders closed in, Morgan finally received permission to resume the assault, but it was too late. Despite being surrounded by enemy fire, he refused to give up. When a British lieutenant demanded his surrender, Morgan shot him through the head. His men could hear his voice above the chaos, encouraging them to fire and leading charges, prompting one soldier to write that, “He seems to be all soul and moves as if he did not touch the earth.” When the Patriots finally began throwing down their weapons in surrender, Morgan burst into tears of rage. Seeing no way to escape, he, too, relinquished his sword, choosing to hand it over to a priest rather than turn it over to a Redcoat.

Morgan and more than 400 Patriots were captured and imprisoned by the British. His captors respected him for his bravery under fire, and one officer even offered him colonelcy in the Royal Army, but Morgan balked, replying that he was no “scoundrel.” Eight months later, the men were finally released in exchange for British prisoners. Upon his return to American soil, Morgan leapt from the transport boat, fell to the ground, stretched his arms out and cried, “Oh, my country!”

Rising Reputation

Reports of Morgan’s bold feats during the Battle of Quebec circulated quickly among Colonial leadership. After his release, Washington reserved a rifle regiment for him, promoting him to colonel and giving him command of a specially created corps of light infantry that included the best marksmen from Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia. The regiment, skilled at gathering intelligence and terrorizing American Indians as well as sharpshooting, stalked General William Howe’s rear guard during its withdrawal from New Jersey and played a critical role in the Battles of Saratoga in 1777.

The men fought valiantly at Freeman’s Farm and Bemis Heights, helping the Patriots successfully resist General John Burgoyne’s offensive with their incessant fire and harassment of the enemy. The riflemen picked off numerous officers

and artillerymen during the 18-day ordeal, contributing to Burgoyne's defeat, and Morgan initiated tactical moves that helped turn the tide of the battles—a conflict that became known as the turning point of the Revolution for its success at securing France as an American ally.

General Horatio Gates praised Morgan for his actions, writing in his battle report to Congress that “too much praise cannot be given to the Corps commanded by Col. Morgan,” and embracing the Old Wagoner in private, declaring “Morgan, you have done wonders.” Despite the accolades from superiors and continued assignments from Washington, Morgan lacked the political connections he needed to advance in the Army. When Congress passed him over for a promotion to Brigadier General in 1779, he resigned from the Army on principle, returning to his farm. The next year, as the British began bearing down on the Carolinas, Congress offered him command of the Southern theatre, but Morgan declined when he learned it didn't include a promotion.

Eventually his sense of patriotism prevailed. After hearing of the disastrous defeat of Gates in Camden, S.C., Morgan put his feelings aside and rejoined the Army to help boost the struggling Southern campaign. In October 1780, he finally received his long-awaited promotion.

The Battle of Cowpens

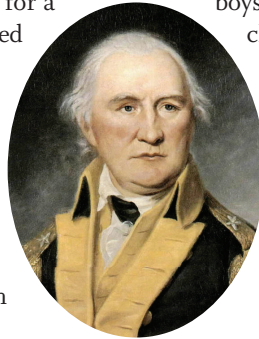
Morgan's finest hour came in the early morning of January 17, 1781, at Cowpens, a popular pasturing area for cattle in the South Carolina Upcountry. Morgan and his so-called Flying Army, a fast-moving group of experienced but untrained Carolina, Virginia and Georgia militiamen and Continental soldiers, retreated to the area near the Broad River after being pursued through the region by aristocratic British Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton and his elite force. With the closest reinforcement 140 miles away, Morgan knew he would likely face Tarleton in battle, so he chose the land accordingly, using the sloping terrain to his advantage and placing the Patriots downhill in the best position to achieve victory. Anticipating the strengths and weaknesses of his opponent as well as his men, he devised a sophisticated battle plan that took both into account.

The night before the battle, Morgan walked through the camp sharing his strategy with the men and his expectations for them. Attempting to ease their nerves, he helped them fix their swords and joked with them about winning the favor of their sweethearts with victory. He even showed off the scars on his back from his flogging decades before, insisting that the British owed him one more lash.

As the Redcoats approached the next morning, Morgan deployed his men into three lines of defense. Knowing that the militia had a tendency to run, he divided them into two groups, placing his sharpshooters up front and ordering them to fire twice before retreating behind the second line. Most of the rest of the militia stood behind the crest of a hill, where they were to fire twice before retreating behind the Continentals who stood 150 yards behind. Morgan correctly assumed that the Continentals would be willing to take the hardest part of the fighting without running.

As the British approached at dawn, Morgan yelled to his men in encouragement, “They give us the British halloo, boys. Let's give them the Indian whoop.” The Redcoats charged what looked like a scant line of skirmishers, but quickly realized they were facing multiple lines of defense. They pressed on until they reached the Continentals, nearly overtaking the Patriots after Tarleton ordered his formidable 71st regiment of Scottish Highlanders to attack the reforming militia to the rear. Disaster nearly ensued when the Continentals mistook an order to turn and face the enemy as a signal to retreat. Morgan used their confusion to his advantage, ordering the men to retreat to a spot he picked, then to fire. Meanwhile the British, believing they had won, broke ranks and charged, but soon found themselves surrounded by Patriots. Inflicted with heavy casualties, they eventually surrendered.

The Battle of Cowpens, considered one of the most decisive Patriot victories, gave the Southern campaign the momentum it needed, paving the way for other victories in North Carolina and Virginia and eventually leading to the surrender of General Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown.



“Great generals are scarce. There are few Morgans to be found.”

—GENERAL NATHANAEL GREENE
UPON MORGAN'S
RETIREMENT FROM THE ARMY

Retirement and Squashing Rebellion

Suffering from sciatica so painful that he struggled to sit on his horse, Morgan retired after the Battle of Cowpens, building another house in Virginia that he named Saratoga after the first battle in which he distinguished himself. In 1790, Congress presented Morgan with a gold medal to honor him for his victory at Cowpens. He briefly flirted with combat again in 1794 when he organized and led a group of volunteer militia against protesters during the Whiskey Rebellion. In 1797, he was elected to serve one term in the House of Representatives, and he remained active serving his community until his death on July 6, 1802.

Of all of the roles he played in his life, from wagoner to legislator, the one Morgan treasured most was commander. As General Nathanael Greene stated upon Morgan's retirement from the Army, “Great generals are scarce. There are few Morgans to be found.”