The Race to the Dan River did not end General Greene’s Southern Army’s retreat from General Cornwallis’ British Army after the crossing of the Dan River on February 14, 1781. That river was only passable by boat at the time but could have gone down quickly allowing a continued pursuit by the British. Although Greene was successful in his objective, he was concerned enough to prepare for continuing the retreat by preparing another crossing of the Staunton River at Cole’s Ferry.

While some of Greene’s troops stayed on the north bank of the Dan for surveillance, the main army moved north crossing the Banister River at Cowford, near this site, on to the old Halifax Court House at Crystal Hill some five or six miles north of the Banister on Rt. 626.

Greene Announces Winning the Race

While in Halifax County in February 1781, Greene wrote and sent many directives and informational letters, as was the custom among 18th century military leaders. On the 17th he writes to Joseph Clay of North Carolina “Our Army is on the North side of the Bannister River, encamped at Halifax Court House in order to tempt the Enemy to cross the river, as a most pleasing prospect presents itself of a strong reinforcement from the Militia of this State...”. He made arrangements for setting up camp for his army with intention to fortify it, though this plan for fortification was never realized.

Relax and Recruit

His troops were soon fed and given moral support by the towns people, and militia volunteers came forward to join his army. During their stay in town, about 1500 to 1800 local militia came out to defend the town, but most of these dissipated as the threat from Cornwallis diminished. Greene had previously ordered his baggage to Halifax, Va., and given “the necessary orders issued to the quarter-master’s department, to make good the passage of Staunton river with the whole army, should such a movement become necessary.”

Going Back for Battle

Greene’s light corps under Col. Otho H. Williams, re-crossed the Banister River on the 17th, re-crossed the Dan on the 20th in pursuit of Cornwallis, followed by the main army on the 21st.

Visit the Crossing of the Dan permanent exhibit at the Prizery in South Boston for a complete story of “the longest continuous running battle in American military history - the Race to the Dan”. Dr. Lawrence Babits

Crossing the Banister River at the Cowford
A 1781 Revolutionary War Trail

“In the camp of Greene joy beamed in every face and as if every man was conscious of having done his duty the subsequent days to the reunion of the army on the north of the Dan were spent in mutual gratulations with the rehearsal of the hopes and fears which agitated every breast during the retreat interspersed with the many simple but interesting anecdotes with which every tongue was strong”... Lt. Col. Henry Lee