

2025 History Festival

A Lifetime of Decision-Making: Charles Sturt

by

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The theme of South Australia's History Festival in 2025 is "Decisions", with a particular focus on decision-making. After all, our history is made by decisions; decisions that maintain the status quo and others that forge new pathways.

Welcome

Ladies and Gentlemen, guests and friends. A very warm welcome to the Charles Sturt Museum Precinct. My name is Scott Smith and I am a Vice President of the Charles Sturt Memorial Museum Trust. I am joined by my son, Kaiden. Kaiden and I both descend from Charles Sturt, where we are respectively first cousins five and six times removed. It is our absolute pleasure to be speaking with you during this history festival month.

This museum precinct is a celebration of Captain Charles Sturt, who was born in 1795 – 230 years ago! A place to memorialise his pioneering explorations that opened up a young country and to honour his contributions to the foundation of South Australia in 1836. It's exciting to consider that next year will be the 190th anniversary of the founding of our state.

The theme of this year's History Festival at the museum, is *A Lifetime of Decision-Making: Charles Sturt*. Namely, we at the Museum have decided to focus on *Charles Sturt's decision in 1839 to relocate his family to Adelaide and build a home in the Reedbeds. A decision that was driven by high expectations. In reality, that key decision was thwarted by political circumstance and financial burden.*

Today, Kaiden and I will share with you an overview of Charles Sturt's life journey that brought him here to the Grange, and then key events in his life afterwards. A series of opportunities and decisions that led to courses of action – we are all faced with a multitude of decisions in our daily lives that will determine the direction of our future. Let's get to work!

First, a question: What are some key decisions that you have made in your life?

Introduction to the Grange

We are here today at The Grange, a colonial home built in 1840—185 years ago—when Charles Sturt and his family began living here. Charles and his wife, Charlotte, raised their family in this house for 13 years until their return to England in 1853. This was a time when South Australia was newly established—just four years old—and full of energy and opportunity for free settlers seeking a new life and the chance to generate wealth.

Today, the block of land housing the museum is known as the Charles Sturt Museum Precinct. It includes the original State Heritage-listed red-bricked house (The Grange), which consists of two distinct sections built a year apart. The red-bricked portion (originally stuccoed) contained the main living areas, while the white-rendered section—now part of the adjacent Visitor Centre—was known as the Nursery Wing. This wing originally provided accommodation for the children, along

with bathroom and toilet facilities, a kitchen, laundry, and eating areas for the servants. The precinct also features heritage gardens, a surrounding park, and the Visitor Centre, which was rebuilt in the 1960s as the Caretaker's Cottage and now houses exhibits.

The property was originally secured in 1838 with two land grants of 80 acres each, formally granted on 21 October 1840. The area, known as the Reedbeds of the Torrens and Port Rivers, quickly became a desirable residence. Within a few years, the estate expanded to 389 acres, much of it prime grazing land, orchards, and vines. The farmyard included horses, cows, beehives, turkeys, guinea fowl, geese, and partridges. The nearby Port River, winding to the west of the house, provided a place for the children to float rafts and fish, while the sandhills and flourishing tea trees created an idyllic frontier between the house and the beach.

Be sure to visit the sundial in the backyard, where you'll find a metallic map depicting the layout of the farm as drawn in 1896 by Charles' second son, Charles Sheppey Sturt, when he was an elderly man.

The Grange was most likely built by Thomas Scown, a Cornish builder highly recommended by Governor Gawler. The house is L-shaped, stuccoed, with a slate roof and shuttered windows, and was one of the few brick houses in Adelaide at the time. Completed in 1841, its design was based on Brownlow Hill in Camden, NSW—the home of Sturt's good friend George McLeay, who had accompanied him on the River Murray expedition. Brownlow Hill remains one of the most prominent and intact colonial farming estates in Australia.

After the Sturt family's permanent departure to England in 1853, The Grange was leased to various tenants while remaining under the family's ownership. It was sold in 1877, after which the land was subdivided to create the village of Grange. Over time, the house became increasingly dilapidated, facing the threat of demolition in the 1950s.

In 1956, The Grange was purchased by the Henley & Grange Council, with strong support from Mayor D.J. Newlands. The Charles Sturt Memorial Museum Precinct officially opened in 1967. Today, it is managed by the Charles Sturt Memorial Museum Trust.

About Charles Sturt

In order to better understand Sturt as a person, we are drawn to a quote about him from the book titled "Life of Charles Sturt" written by Mrs Napier George Sturt in 1899. A quote made by a young James Smith who personally knew Sturt during his expeditions:

He was one of Nature's noblemen, generous and unselfish to a degree; always kind and considerate always sympathising and ready to oblige or help others in every way he possibly could.

In addition, the following is an excerpt from Sturt's obituary:

His energy, mental and physical, was extreme; his perseverance indomitable. As a leader he was resolute and fearless but withal so considerate that those associated with him were ready to follow him through every obstacle.

Charles Napier Sturt was born on 28 April 1795 in Bengal, India, to British parents. He was the eldest son of 13 children, and he travelled to England for his education at 5 years of age that culminated in him attending the prestigious Harrow School. Sturt joined the British Army in 1813

(when he was 18) and served in several countries such as Canada, France and Ireland. He narrowly missed out on the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 and that cost him advancement in the military.

He sailed to the colony of Sydney in New South Wales in 1827 with a detachment of his regiment in charge of convicts. He was then supported by the Governor of New South Wales, Sir Ralph Darling, who appointed Sturt his military secretary and also Major of the brigade to the garrison. Sturt's military career had stagnated. Little was however known of the geography of Australia at the time. Sturt's interest in exploration was piqued.

Fame in Australia

Sturt's first major expedition took place from 1828 to 1829, to explore the Macquarie River through the Macquarie Marshes to the future Darling River. Then, he traversed the Macquarie, Bogan and Castlereagh rivers. This expedition started to establish Sturt's name and reputation as an explorer.

Sturt's second major expedition then took place from 1829 to 1830, where he traced the Murrumbidgee River to where it intersected the Murray River and then onto the mouth of the Murray at Lake Alexandrina. Sturt's two expeditions, particularly of the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers, revealed extensive swaths of land in New South Wales and South Australia for future settlements and development activities of the young colony. It also unlocked the riddle of the river system of south-eastern Australia. His name and positive reputation as an explorer were now becoming firmly established within three years of arriving in Australia.

Sturt had capitalised upon opportunity. Opportunity associated with the young colony of NSW needing expansion into unchartered lands. Political opportunity associated with Sir Ralph Darling taking a shine to Sturt and offering him an influential position. Opportunity associated with Sturt recognising the need to create a future for himself that may need to exist outside of the military. One could say that Sturt had struck gold, by being in the right place at the right time and embarking on his two career defining expeditions.

Charles Sturt returned to England in 1832 on sick leave, where he arrived almost blind no doubt from the toll of exploring the harsh Australian terrain. In 1833 he published an influential book, *Two Expeditions into the Interior of Southern Australia*, which was important for the founding of the state of South Australia in 1836. Following the publication of his book, and no doubt influenced by the knowledge that his 39th Regiment of Foot (that he was a member of) had been assigned to duty in India, Charles Sturt sold his commission, took a military pension of £100 per annum, and made an application for a settler's land grant.

He met and married Charlotte Green in September 1834 and then set sail back to the colony of New South Wales. On arrival with his wife in 1835, Sturt was full of optimism and had high expectations for his future. On 17th April 1835, he sent a letter to his brother William in Calcutta. Encouraging him to 'scrape together' £4,000 - £5,000 and to come to Sydney. "Rest assured there is a wide field for fortune in New South Wales." he wrote, followed by "Even with the little I have, I have no doubt but that four years will see me in the enjoyment of every rational comfort".

The Landowner and Grazier

In 1835, the Sturt's purchased a 1,300-acre property at Bargo Brush, near Mittagong, about 95 km on the way to Canberra from Sydney, where in 1837 their first son, Napier George Sturt, was born.

Meanwhile in February 1837, Sturt was gazetted to receive 5,000 acres of land, in recognition of his 1828-29-30 expeditions, however, it was conditional on his relinquishing his military pension of £100 per annum. For your information, £100 in 1837 is worth about £14.3k today (in pound Sterling) in 2025, which converts to AU\$29.6k. Sturt hurriedly chose undeveloped land at Queanbeyan (near present day Canberra) which was valued at £1,250 and called it Belconnen. The property was however subject to severe flooding as it was surrounded by the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo Rivers, and the Ginninderra Creek. Perhaps the site was chosen as it was close to waterways, with Sturt being ever the explorer and in pursuit of water.

The Sturts then moved to a 1,000 acre property they had purchased at Varroville (a suburb of Sydney), where in 1838 his second son, Charles Sheppey Sturt, was born. The Varroville farm was purchased for £1,250 while the value of the grant had dwindled to a value of £450. The Sturt's were however of some substance, holding 7,300 acres of land. His life as a public servant was not developing due to various politics, such as having been unsuccessful in a bid to join the Colony's Legislative Council. Life as a landowner was however looking promising. Severe drought in NSW in 1836 and 1839 however changed all that.

With insufficient water to take his cattle and sheep to market in Sydney, Sturt drove overland to South Australia. He left Bargo Brush in April 1838 and arrived in Adelaide 17 August 1838, by following the course of the Murray River. His choice of route had more to do with exploration rather than commerce, and this was at the expense of the cattle arriving in poor condition in Adelaide, and in turn fetching a very average price. Sturt was ever the explorer (and dreamer) and perhaps a life destined for discovery.

While Sturt was driving his cattle, Colonel Light and the Survey Department staff in South Australia all resigned on 2 July 1838, due to dispute over the location of Adelaide. The Survey Department was in a shambles, surveys were not proceeding, immigrants were arriving and land prices were falling. Arguments over where the capital should be sited in Adelaide (as per Colonel Light) or Encounter Bay (as per Governor Hindmarsh) were abound.

Sturt was enthusiastically welcomed to Adelaide. He was accorded a public dinner, and the Acting Governor of South Australia George Stephen sought his assistance to settle the ongoing dispute surrounding the site of Adelaide as the colony's Capital. Sturt was held in such esteem that his recommendation was influential in selecting the current site of Adelaide.

Acting Governor Stephens then offered Sturt the position of Surveyor General, which he refused. Colonel George Gawler then arrived as Governor on 12 October 1838, where he again offered the Sturt the role with an annual income of £500. This time Sturt accepted.

Sturt then returned to Sydney on 14 October 1838 aboard the vessel Hope. The Sturt's sold their properties in New South Wales (selling Varroville NSW for a loss of £700), took a ship (with relocation costs of £197) and in 1839 he arrived in Adelaide. He and his family settled on Town Acre 288, which is the northeastern corner of Hutt and Wakefield streets, where in 1839 his third son, Evelyn Gawler Sturt was born. He took out a mortgage to buy the home on East Terrace for £500 with the intention of building a home on his two section land grant 900 and 901 at the Reedbeds. The delay in selling the Adelaide home after taking up residency at The Grange meant two mortgages – another mortgage of £500 for the Grange. In 1840, the "Grange" was built, upon which the family settled.

High Expectations

Upon his family relocation to Adelaide, Sturt had high expectations as a public figure. Sturt took up the survey work abandoned by Colonel Light as Surveyor General. Governor Gawler had promised that Sturt would have an annual income of £600 but he was unauthorised to go beyond £500. The appointment was to prove short lived with the arrival of Lieutenant Frome from England, where he had been appointed by the Colonial Office, as the Colonial Surveyor of South Australia. Sturt accepted his demotion to Registrar-General at £400 per annum with good grace, formed a lasting friendship with Frome. A career setback however Sturt took it on the chin. Together with B.T. Finniss he continued with the all-important land surveys.

With the arrival of Governor Grey and the return of Gawler to England, Sturt was given the role of Assistant Land Commissioner. A role which was then abolished by Governor Grey and in early 1843 Sturt's salary was reduced to £200 as part of Grey's debt reduction.

Floods in 1842 caused a loss 1800 vines and 3000 fruit trees from the Grange, and the property had depreciated. A cause for celebration was the birth of his fourth child and their only daughter Charlotte Eyre Sturt in 1843.

The Sturts were however concerned for their financial future. Sturt was also not reaching the lofty heights that he aspired to. Things were not going too well. He was being thwarted by political circumstance and financial burden.

Ever the Explorer

As written by Charles Sturt in 1844:

I have a strange idea that there is a central sea, and I should go fully prepared for a Voyage. You, I am afraid will condemn this but there is a destiny for us all and unconsciously we are the instruments in our own hands of its fulfilment.

Edward Eyre was making a name for himself as an explorer and Sturt was perhaps feeling side lined. He sought finance from London to mount an expedition, of which it was granted. In pursuit of fame and fortune, and as a reset from politics that was stifling advancement, Sturt set off on his third and final expedition in August 1844, in pursuit of a great saltwater lake in central Australia known as the "inland sea". During the expedition Sturt was paid £500 pa plus half his salary as Registrar-General amounting to £100 pa. The sea was however not to be found, and Sturt returned home after almost 18 months in January 1846. A shadow of his former self due to the toll of the harsh Australian landscape.

In September 1846, nine months after returning from the Central Expedition, Sturt was appointed Colonial Treasurer with a pay of £500 per annum in addition to his role of Registrar-General. This provided him with a salary of £700 per annum.

In March 1847 Sturt re-mortgaged The Grange for £500 at 15% per annum to raise funds to return to England. He leased the property to Dr Rankine for 5 years at a rate of £30 per year from June 1847.

In May 1847 he left for England with plans to publish his third expedition journal, with no intention of returning to Adelaide. He wrote his second book *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia*, although he continued to suffer from poor eyesight. Sturt's Central Expedition was published in early

1849. Governor Henry Young, having arrived in Adelaide April 1848, sent a letter to Sturt offering him the position of Colonial Secretary and a seat on the Legislative Council if he returned to Adelaide.

Sturt and family subsequently returned on 25 August 1849. In 1851 he retired from the post due to bad eyesight and was granted a pension of £600 per annum. By 1853 Sturt's failing eye sight, his concern for his children's education and the exodus of his servants to the gold fields, he decided to return to England. Sturt leased the Grange for £200 per annum.

Sturt was encouraged by friends to apply for a knighthood, not only for the recognition of his explorations and civil service, but to guarantee a yearly income for his wife and daughter. The award would have provided £300 per annum but with the knighthood never gazetted due to his passing, his wife was granted the title Lady by Queen Victoria with a stipend of £80 per annum.

What a curious combination is expectation, politics and finance. A combination equally important and influential today and no doubt in years to come.

A Life of Service

Sturt wore several hats with honour throughout his relatively long life and influential career. He was a soldier, explorer, surveyor, author, public servant, statesman, grazier, naturalist, as well as a husband, father, and a mentor. He had the distinct ability to reinvent himself, depending on his stage in life and opportunities as they arose. His passion for exploration however did not waiver and he was even planning expeditions for the Royal Geographical Society of the United Kingdom when he was retired and living in England.

There are many landmarks named after Sturt, in recognition of his profound influence. Examples include Sturt's Desert Pea, City of Charles Sturt, Sturt Street in Adelaide, Sturt Highway, Sturt's Stony Desert, Sturt National Park, and Charles Sturt University, to name but a few.

The legacy of Charles Sturt and his family continues to be celebrated and remembered at the Grange.

Thank you.

