

Basic Detail Report



00008150

Title

Travel chest with rectangular top and two long drawers

Date

c 1820

Medium

Wood, metal

Dimensions

Overall: 415 x 710 x 381 mm, 21.2 kg

Name

Travel chest

History

Watson Augustus Steel was born into a military family in 1789 at Rockley Manor in the parish of Ogbourne St. Andrew, in the county of Wiltshire, England. Rockley Manor belonged to General the Hon. F. St. John of the 117th Regiment who was a friend of Steel's father, Colonel Thomas Steel, also of the 117th Regiment (and later the 90th Light Infantry). Watson Augustus Steel was the youngest of four sons, all of whom were officers in the Regular Army. He was one of the original foundation cadets of the Royal Military College Marlow (Sandhurst) when it was inaugurated by the Duke of York on May 17, 1802. He graduated on 31 January 1806 to an Ensigncy in the 67th Foot before being promoted later that year to Lieutenant in the 89th Regiment of Foot where he remained for most of his military career. (The 89th Regiment later assimilated with the 87th to become the Royal Irish Fusiliers.) Upon the outbreak of war with the United States in 1812, Watson Augustus Steel became an Adjutant of the 89th and left for service in Canada. He was involved in the campaigns of 1813-1814 and was present at the pivotal battles of Christlers and Niagara. At the battle of Niagara Steel was severely wounded and suffering from a head injury when he was taken prisoner and moved to the American lines at Rochester's Farm. A biographical article in the Sydney Morning Herald (22 July 1876, page 5) states that after recovering from his injuries Steel escaped along with a number of other prisoners and survived with the assistance of several freemasons. After narrowly avoiding recapture, Steel and his companions sailed a boat to Nova Scotia to re-join his regiment at Quebec. When news was received soon after that Napoleon had escaped from exile in Elba, the 89th Regiment was recalled. Steel was next transferred to India and served in the Maratha War of 1817-1818. In 1818 Watson Augustus Steel married Elizabeth Senior, the daughter of an officer. When the Burmese War broke out Steel's regiment was ordered to Rangoon but before entering into the conflict he was promoted Captain in the 34th (Border) Regiment. Steel returned to England in 1824 where he was quartered at Canterbury and Gosport for several years. On the 5th of August 1828, after 26 years of service with the British Army, Steel retired by the sale of his commissions from the half pay list of the 34th Foot.

Regulations issued in 1827 enabled him to dispose of his commission conditional upon settling overseas. This would entitle him to a land grant of 4000 acres provided he resided there for seven years and employed a certain number of assigned servants. On 6 February 1829 Watson Steel arrived in Australia with his family onboard the liner PERSIAN. Soon after his arrival Steel acquired 1920 acres on the west bank of Campbell's River under an order of February 21, 1829 by Governor Darling. Darling recommended the Bathurst district for Steel's settlement, an area that his brother, Captain Henry Steel (formerly of the 102nd Regiment) had already relocated to several years earlier. At the time the local parishes were not yet named and it was the rule for grantees to give some distinctive name to their land to enable authorities to locate and distinguish them. In this case Captain Steel chose the name 'Rockley' in honour of his birthplace. According to an article written by Watson Augustus Steel's grandson of the same name, ('History of Rockley, New South Wales', Royal Australian Historical Society vol XV 1929) Steel was appointed a Magistrate in April 1831 and attended the Bathurst, Parramatta and Sydney Benches for 25 years. During his later years Watson Augustus Steel moved to Sydney (1838) and to Parramatta (1840), leaving the management of his Bathurst properties to his sons and brother. By 1872 Steel had moved to Hyde Park House, his residence at 149 Liverpool Street. He died at this location on 19 July 1876 at the age of 87 and was buried at Camperdown Cemetery. At the time of his death Watson Augustus Steel was survived by two sons and three daughters. Watson Augustus Steel III (1861 - 1946), whose name appears on a paper label on one of the wooden chests in the collection of the Australian National Maritime Museum, continued the family's military tradition and served in the NSW Mounted Rifles in the Boer War. The Steel family remained in the Bathurst district for three generations, establishing themselves as one of the most prominent pioneer families in New South Wales.