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Bringing pioneering industrialist Rebecca Lukens to life



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Susannah Brody recreates Rebecca Lukens. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

By **BILL RETTEW** | wrettew@dailylocal.com | Daily Local News

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COATESVILLE — When reenactor Susannah Brody dons a period bonnet and dress, she brings Rebecca Lukens, of Brandywine Iron Works, to life.

The company later became Lukens Steel and is now owned by Cleveland Cliffs.

If you can suspend belief for just an instant, the viewer is transported back to Coatesville in the 1800s when a woman successfully ran the local ironworks.



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Rebecca Lukens of Brandywine (Lukens) Iron Works. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

“She was a tough broad,” Brody said about Lukens. “She was very, very smart, well-educated and she knew the business.”

Brody lives the role.

“I joke sometimes that Rebecca has taken up residence inside of me,” she quipped. “At the slightest encouragement, she’s willing to come out and speak her mind.”



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Lukens (1794-1854) wrote that she sometimes lived a “melancholy” life. Husband Dr. Charles Lukens died young and only two of her six children lived to old age. Her father Isaac Pennock, who started the mill in 1810, did not clearly leave the mill to her in his will. Lukens fought and sometimes paid off relatives for control of the mill.

To prepare for her living history program, Brody researched and read three primary sources: a never-completed Lukens autobiography; the iron operator’s diary; and “The Statement,” a history of the ironworks.

As a former Uwchlan Township resident, the retired special education teacher fell in love with history, while a member of the township historical commission.

“I love the digging,” she said about research.

As a teacher, she took courses on storytelling and then combined history and telling a tale.

“It makes the history more interesting,” she said. “These are real people who lived a long time ago and what happened to them and the people of Chester County.”

The National Iron & Steel Heritage Museum is located on the campus of the Lukens National Historic District, at 50 S. 1st Avenue in Coatesville. Easily accessible in the heart of Coatesville and adjacent to the River Walk, NISHM is (usually) open six days a week for tours, lectures, and educational programs.

While currently closed for renovations to exhibits, it will reopen again in March 2022. Visit online today at www.steelmuseum.org to view a vast array of virtual tours, exhibits, lectures, and resources. You can also find the Rebecca Lukens presentation on the website.

The museum draws international crowds to its facility, which educates the public on the people, places, products, and processes of steelmaking, as well as the importance of educating children in the STEAM discipline (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math). The museum staff can be reached at 610-384-9282 during regular business hours.



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native's favorite part of his beat is writing the weekly Sunday column, "Small Talk."

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