

Historic photograph of the Brandywine Iron Works and Nail Factory, courtesy of the National Iron and Steel Heritage Museum.



A portrait of Rebecca Lukens, courtesy of the National Iron and Steel Heritage Museum.



Terracina used by Rebecca Lukens' daughter now in the Lukens National Historic District.

# Forged in steel: The life and accomplishments of Rebecca Lukens

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A child born just as George Washington entered his second term as President would become one of the most influential businesswomen in our nation.

Rebecca Webb Pennock entered this world on January 6, 1794 at Fallowfield, Pa. The second child of Isaac and Martha Pennock, she was blessed being born into a family of successful farmers. Her great-grandfather Joseph Pennock served in the Pennsylvania Assembly, as a Justice in Chester County and built Primitive Hall in West Marlborough Township.

Rebecca's father was an industrious man, owning farmland and an operation called the Federal Slitting Mill on Buck Run near Coatesville, which produced iron rods and strips much in demand for use in barrels, nails, wagon wheels and other items.

Little did he know that his daughter would someday enter the steel business and change the course of American history.

Rebecca was fortunate being a Quaker: their strictly held beliefs made them insist on giving both boys and girls a solid education in reading, writing, mathematics and other skills. Her closeness to her father likely caused some of his knowledge of the metals business to rub off on her. She was present often as he conducted his duties at the iron works and other properties.

When he began a partnership with Jesse Kersey in 1810, Isaac Pennock bought the Moses Coates farm on the West Branch of the Brandywine, converting its sawmill into an iron mill. That mill became the Brandywine Iron Works and Nail Factory.

Over the years, Rebecca became more closely linked with family steel plate operations. In the spring of 1812, she accompanied her father to Philadelphia, where she met Dr. Charles Lukens. As detailed in *Rebecca Lukens: A Legacy to Steel* published by the Graystone Society, her life changed at that moment. The two met several times thereafter and were married in 1813. A few years later, Rebecca's father purchased Jess Kersey's interest in the Brandywine Iron Works.



Historical marker honoring 200 years of production at the Lukens Steel facility.

Although the plant needed extensive refurbishment, Dr. Lukens upgraded the mill, which by 1818 was producing the first boiler plate in America. Their product was of such high quality it was eagerly sought out by shipbuilders and other businesses.

The future appeared bright for Brandywine Iron Works, but sadly, Rebecca's father died in 1824. Yet another tragedy struck the next year, when her husband Charles passed away, leaving Rebecca to care for their three young daughters. Charles's dying request was for Rebecca to continue the business. She promised to do so, despite her apprehension: "Necessity is a stern task mistress; and my every want gave me courage..."

Rebecca was determined to build on the company's successes, and by 1834, the mill was completely rebuilt and refitted. She made the firm stronger and more efficient- and she soon began to see the fruits of her labors: "I had built a very superior mill... and our character for making boiler plate stood first in the market, hence we had as much business as we could do." She expanded operations, opened a store, a warehouse and a freight agency which provided access to the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh markets.

The Panic of 1837 caused one of the worst contractions in economic activity the country had ever seen. Rebecca persevered, stopping operations temporarily while demand

slackened, having her crew repair equipment. She paid workers with produce and dairy products from her nearby farm. It worked. The business survived.

Rebecca was a "working mother" decades before that term became popular. She raised her three daughters and saw them all married while successfully running and expanding the business into new markets.

Rebecca died on December 10, 1854 at the age of 60. She achieved far more in her lifetime than most men of her generation. As the first female CEO of a major industrial operation, Lukens broke new ground, and opened the door for women who decades later would start to climb the corporate ladder. The company she shepherded through good times and bad became the highest quality producer of steel plate in the United States.

In 1892, *Locomotive Engineering* announced that Lukens Steel had "...demonstrated the greatest care and attention to the production of the best article that could be made... no better plate is to be found on the market."

Lukens Steel was run for many years as a family business, by Rebecca's children, family relations Charles Huston and later his sons. As America entered the 20th Century, what is now known as the Lukens Executive Office Building was constructed (1902), along with a new steam-driven mill the following year that produced 136-inch wide steel plate.



Grand staircase in the Lukens Executive Office Building.

Cost cutting and innovation, including clad plate binding two metals together helped the firm weather the Great Depression. World War II saw business ramp up as Lukens produced plate for the U.S. Navy, which named a Liberty Ship in honor of Rebecca. In 1949, Charles Lukens Huston, Jr. became the fifth generation running the company.

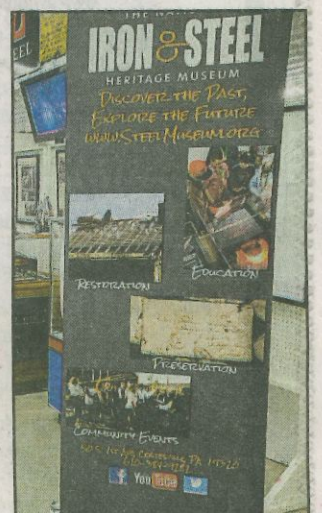
Over subsequent decades, the firm actively supplied products for a variety of markets. Lukens steel was used to build the World Trade Center, two Nimitz-class nuclear aircraft carriers, Aegis-class cruisers and submarines for the U.S. Navy, ballistic missiles and the Army's Abrams tank.

Volatility in the steel industry caused changes of ownership; Bethlehem Steel purchased Lukens in 1997. Subsequently the firm changed hands several times. In 2020 Cleveland-Cliffs became the new owners. Today it is the oldest continuously operating steel mill in North America—all because an industrious woman managed an operation that helped our nation to thrive for more than two centuries.

Rebecca's memory lives on in the landscape. The Lukens Historic District in Coatesville encompasses four buildings associated with Rebecca, her family and company operations. A tour of their facilities by docent and local author Catherine Quillman provided a rare opportunity to view the entire complex. Visit

the National Iron and Steel Heritage Museum website at <https://steelmuseum.org> for details and to schedule a tour.

Gene Pisasale is an historian, author and lecturer based in Kennett Square. His ten books focus on the history of the Chester County/mid-Atlantic region. His latest book is *Forgotten Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania and Delaware in the American Revolution*. Gene's books are available on his website at [www.GenePisasale.com](http://www.GenePisasale.com) and an [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com). He can be reached via e-mail at [Gene@GenePisasale.com](mailto:Gene@GenePisasale.com).



Entry room at the National Iron and Steel Heritage Museum.



A model display of the rolling mill used at Rebecca Lukens' factory.