Forged in steel: The life and accomplishments of Rebecca Lukens

By Gene Pisasaile Contributing Writer

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, 1844, in Fallsewird, Pa. The second child of Isaac and Martha Pennock, she was reared in Pennsylvania's lush farmlands and nestled in 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 the Ram 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 strict beliefs made them more open to giving both boys and girls a solid education in reading, writing, mathematics and other skills. Her closeness to her father likely came from her knowledge of the metal 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 1816, Isaac Pennock bought the Moses Coates farm out 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 1819, she accompanied her father to Philadelphia, where she met Dr. Charles Lukens. As detailed in Rebecca Lukens: A Legacy to Steel published by the Brandywine Iron Works Museum, she fell in love with his sense of humor and wit.

When her father died in 1824, 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 more efficient and增加了 her 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 the country had ever seen. Rebecca persevered, stopping operations temporarily while demand slackened, having her crew repair equipment. She paid wages in products with produce 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 "...de- struited 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 James and his wife. 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.

Cost cutting and innovation, including clad plate binding two metals together helped Fukens in business. The firm weathered the Great Depression, World War II raw materials running up 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's actively supplied products for a variety of markets. Lukens steel was used to build the World Trade Center, two Nimtzie-class nuclear aircraft carriers, Angls-class destroyers 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 Quinnan provided a rare opportunity to view the entire complex. Visit the National Iron and Steel Heritage Museum website at https://steelheritagemuseum.org for details and to schedule a tour.

Gene Pisasaile is an historian, author and lecturer based in Kennet 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.GenePisasaile.com and on www.amazon.com. He can be reached via e-mail at Gene@GenePisasaile.com.