

Famous Mad Hatters

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The origin of the phrase "Mad as a Hatter" is due to the incidence of odd behavior on the part of workers in the early felt hat industry. Their odd behavior, or "madness", was the result of mercury poisoning contracted on the job. Others exposed to Hg also behaved strangely or suffered serious health problems.

Isaac Newton has been called the greatest scientist who ever lived. Recent mercury analyses on strands of his hair indicate high levels of Hg and other toxic elements. A suggestion has been made that his bout of paranoia in the 1690's was due to elevated levels of mercury.

Michael Faraday served as Fullerian Professor of Chemistry at the Royal Institution in London for most of his scientific career. There he breathed mercury vapor every day. As a result, his memory losses became such that he was forced into retirement. "Again and again I tear up my letters, for I write nonsense. I will not write anymore." Mercury poisoning had caused the great mind to deteriorate.

Boston Corbett worked as a hatter before, during, and after the Civil War. He was finally committed to an insane asylum. But not before he violated orders and shot and killed John Wilkes Booth. Could it be that conditions in an early chemical industry altered U. S. history?

"Mad" women in History have been more difficult to locate. One eminent female whose health was affected by chemical exposure was Clare Boothe Luce. Her health problems while serving as U.S. Ambassador to Italy in the 1950's will be discussed.