HIGH STYLE AND LOW MORALS:  
JOHN NEWLAND MAFFITT AND THE METHODIST CHURCH  
1794-1850  
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Few Methodists inspired more comment than John Newland Maffitt during the Second Great Awakening. An itinerant revivalist, the Irish born Maffitt delivered sermons as “ornate as the tail of a peacock,” while fashionably attired to accentuate his striking dark eyes, rosy cheeks, black hair, and high white forehead. Many listeners, especially women, found this “Beau Brummel of preachers” compelling. By 1841, Maffitt’s appointment as chaplain to the House of Representatives underscored his prominence: he had eclipsed the earlier, homespun circuit riders to present a more refined evangelical faith acceptable to the nation’s leadership. Gentility and Methodism no longer conflicted; with Maffitt, they appeared inseparable.

Critics nonetheless harbored reservations about the charismatic Maffitt. Some judged Maffitt to be an intellectually limited, albeit engaging, preacher, who provided more entertainment than instruction. Others wondered about Maffitt’s lavish attention to female converts, and fellow Methodists found him eccentric. Maffitt’s career in the 1820s, despite impressive revivals, suffered from indiscretions; his strained marital relations resulted in divorce by the 1830s. Yet Maffitt flourished, commanding national attention, until additional scandals in 1846 prompted Manhattan Methodists to investigate. Maffitt challenged their authority and threatened suit. Under attack, his preaching license suspended, Maffitt fled to Arkansas to join the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, before dying in 1850.

This fall from grace reveals more than a chronicle of a preacher gone bad. Maffitt illuminates Methodism’s evolution from a rough hewed, insur-

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Methodist History

gent movement into a polished, national denomination. Unlike earlier circuit riders, who regarded finery as suspect and gentility no guarantee of salvation, Maffitt turned them into ministerial trademarks. His adjective laden sermons and stylish clothing exposed the cultural rift between Methodism’s past and future identity. But was Maffitt in the vanguard of this shift, or a poser whose attainments were more superficial than substantive? What did middle-class Methodists think of Maffitt’s ministry? And how would the church leadership, struggling to define the faith, respond to Maffitt? Such questions not only cut to the heart of denominational identity, but they reveal Maffitt’s significance within early republic Methodism.3

John Newland Maffitt was born on December 28, 1794 to a Dublin, Ireland, family of merchant-tailors. If Maffitt’s autobiography, Tears of Contrition, published in 1821, is accurate, the future minister focused upon literature instead of business. Maffitt claimed his “feelings caught fire” at fourteen from novels and romances, and fueled by the “seductive page” he wished to become a “hero of renown.” At twenty, Maffitt experienced an “inward call to preach” at a Methodist meeting. Unsanctioned by Methodist officials, Maffitt hoped to emulate George Whitefield, the Grand Itinerant, by touring the countryside. At Swords, a village just north of Dublin, angry Catholics threatened Maffitt, because he prayed “that God might open their eyes, and send a pure flame from off his altar, to purify their souls from dead works, and bury up all the tinsel and dross of their idolatrous worship.” Escaping unharmed, Maffitt continued his ministry.4

Maffitt’s preaching aroused opposition from his wife, Ann Carnic. Ann’s marriage portion bolstering the tailor establishment in 1814, and she wanted Maffitt to tend to business, not religion. What little we know about Ann describes her as a “shrewd, worldly woman,” who was “always fixed on the main chance” and characterized by a “long and lasting” temper. Clashes between the couple resulted; the strain of raising several children added to the tension. Then, in 1819, the tailor establishment was “wholly sunk,” prompting Maffitt’s to go to the United States.5

Wesley’s disciples had reaped results in the United States. Led by an advance guard of circuit riders, the Methodists prospered in the western and southern states, winning converts. Calvinist New England, if cool at first, eventually welcomed them. Massive camp meetings supplied preachers a forum for oratory, and smaller prayer meetings refreshed local Methodist

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societies. The denomination flourished under Francis Asbury, the leading bishop of the church, its personal, heartfelt faith, complemented by lay preachers and a well-established hierarchy, produced impressive numbers: 74,000 adherents in 1800 became 150,000 by 1830.

Early Methodist embraced the vernacular culture of the young republic. Itinerant preachers decided pride and pomposity, propounding a plain style of faith in accord with the emerging democratic ethos of the time. Such preachers as Lorenzo Dow tapped into superstitions and folk beliefs, employing dreams and prophecies, to underscore their message. The itinerant Dow's wild appearance made him an especially memorable figure. Others, such as Peter Cartwright, Benjamin Abbott, and Billy Hibbard worked on people's emotions with memorable, descriptive sermons. Not surprisingly, their rustic speech and plain path won converts. Early Methodist leveled the gulf between the clergy in the pulpit and the worshiped in the pews. Building upon this foundation, Maffitt would promote a middle class version of Methodism, emphasizing a very different, flowery style.

John N. Maffitt's arrival in New York City in 1810 began inauspiciously. 


What explains this success? After all, as an Irish Methodist, Maffitt's preaching differed from the usual Congregational fare. Such novelty perhaps supplies an explanation. Irish Methodists such as Maffitt and John Summerfield, another recent immigrant, resonated with Americans. Their voices and features captivated audiences by appealing to the middle-class culture of refinement. Etiquette books stressed the importance of display and appearance. Among Maffitt's contemporaries and voice attracted adherents at Middletown, Connecticut, in 1830, one listener recalled, "The remarkable


John Maffitt continued to appeal to middle-class worshipers. At times, Maffitt entered crowded churches by windows to preach; inside, he worked the sanctuary with a sermon or a song before inviting repentant sinners forward. Church groups vied for Maffitt's services, hopeful of attracting affluent people with deep pockets; in return, Maffitt used their churches to give public lectures before paying audiences. In New York City, where Maffitt addressed a religious charity, women tossed rings, bracelets, brooches, and necklaces into the collection plate; men emptied their pockets of money. Near Nashville, Tennessee, Maffitt preached and lectured for two weeks before "grey-headed men" and "beautiful maidens, with jeweled hair." Visiting Cincinnati, Maffitt secured the favor of President-elect William Henry Harrison. Old Tippicanoe, despite Whig campaign literature, was no log cabin dweller but the son of a prominent Virginia family. In church, Maffitt sang one of Harrison's favorite song, and the general reciprocated
with a handshake.  

As an apostle of refined Methodism, Maffitt looked the part, his clothing, cut in a “fashionable style,” had padding to conceal his disproportionate shoulders. Outside churches Maffitt’s carefully styled hair stayed uncovered. Unlike the unkempt Lorenzo Dow, Maffitt played upon church-goers’ vanity by emphasizing his appearance. Publishing added to Maffitt’s genteel aura. Many ministers had sermons and tracts printed, appealing to middle-class households, but Maffitt blended faith and commerce. Why else publish the *Oratorical Dictionary* in 1835, which advised readers to employ “many tones” to “express every shade of variation of passion,” if not to drum up business? The book’s subtitle added that it could be used “for the colleges, academies, schools, public orators, public speakers of all profession, and classical scholars in general.” By assuming the Chair of Elocution and Belle Lettres at La Grange College, Alabama, in 1837, Maffitt showed the power of speaking: he was now Professor Maffitt. As congressional chaplain in 1841, Maffitt addressed the nation’s legislators, people who knew something about speaking, and if John Quincy Adams questioned Maffitt’s intellect, he nonetheless acknowledged his popular appeal.

Maffitt’s ministry paralleled changes within Methodism. By the 1840s, if not earlier, the church of Dow, Hibbard, and Cartwright was rapidly disappearing; its unadorned Scriptural emphasis and plain-style faith appeared hackneyed, if not old-fashioned, to a new generation of established, middle-class worshipers. Proper manners and attire assumed greater importance among such people. Indeed, church leaders targeted their publishing efforts toward a more literate audience, for Methodist periodicals challenged the cultural high ground occupied by the Episcopalians and Presbyterians. Maffitt played a role too. Not only could he dispel the rusticity of early Methodism, but his sermonizing, attire, and literary attainments furnished a


facade of gentility.  

Not everyone found Maffitt convincing. An anonymous New York City writer, Candour, who authored an 1830 essay, "Theological Pretenders or an Analysis of the Character and Conduct of the Reverend John N. Maffitt," described the preacher as a "theological tadpole" who muddied the "streams of religion" by deceiving the "lower and more illiterate classes." Candour found Maffitt's discourses wanting: "The thing is utterly impracticable--there is nothing about them that is tangible--nothing that can be seized upon. You think at one moment that you discover a substance, grasp at it, and lo! 'tis moonshine." Maffitt's attention to female converts drew scorn too, for the minister, according to Candour, sidled alongside female converts to position "his feet to theirs" and "excite more than devotional feelings."  

Others questioned Maffitt's moral deportment. Ormsby M. Mitchel, an American astronomer, who shared a stage with Maffitt in the winter of 1832-33, recalled the preacher inviting his wife to sit alongside him. Unaware she was married, Maffitt's excessive gallantry could be liable to misinterpretation. Several years later, Maffitt's attentions to a "beautiful lady of fashion" in Nashville caused a presiding elder to issue a "mild reproof." Drinking presented another problem for Maffitt. Methodists frowned on alcohol. Yet Maffitt, according to one account, customarily downed a glass of brandy before speaking to deepen his voice. Another person remembered Maffitt as the "jolliest of the jolly" in a stagecoach, freely drinking brandy.  

Fellow clerics delivered judgements also. In 1830 Bishop Elijah Hedding blocked Maffitt's appointment as a General Agent to the Missionary Society. No explanation was forthcoming, but Hedding had participated in the 1822 ecclesiastical council investigating Maffitt, and he may have judged his colleague ill-qualified. That Maffitt, a known fund raiser, was turned down, is telling. Heman Bangs offered private criticism. A leading Manhattan Methodist, Bangs observed Maffitt at an 1843 revival at the Forsyth Street Church. Despite large crowds, the ensuing spectacle unsettled Bangs. The listeners, he believed, were "more taken with the man than with Christ." As Bangs confided to his journal:  

How dreadful in the last day, if any preacher shall be found to have preached himself, or with any view to make himself popular, or to gain money by preaching. St. Paul would glory in nothing but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. I do not say that Mr. M., or any other man does it; yet I is a great word with him, often introduced.  

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Such concerns became public in 1846. In New York City, between speaking engagements, Maffitt boarded with a Methodist family. His hosts soon became alarmed by Maffitt’s behavior, lodging a formal complaint with church officials. The precise nature of the allegation is unclear—Maffitt claimed it involved “little else than a black girl’s coming suddenly into his room and finding him attending to a call of nature.” A more current judgment suggests that Maffitt habitually exposed himself. Whatever the transgression, the Preachers’ Meeting was promptly informed. According to the Methodist Discipline, any preacher “under report of being guilty of some crime” had to hear the accusers’ charges before the presiding elder.22

The examination resolved little. Although willing to apologize to the male household head, Maffitt denied the charges alleged by the absent witnesses, the household women. When the women presented themselves to testify Maffitt failed to appear. One account claims that Maffitt visited the women, requested their silence, and threatened a libel suit. The women stuck to their story. Maffitt’s colleagues, meanwhile, pressed him to hear the women’s testimony. Maffitt informed his local elder, the Reverend Martindale, pastor of the Norfolk Street Church, that a speaking engagement in the South required the return of his membership certificate. Martindale duly returned the certificate, but Maffitt instead went east, not south, to Brooklyn, where the pastor of the Centenary Church, the Reverend John C. Green, accepted his credentials. Green announced that a committee would hear the charges against Maffitt on December, 1846.23

Irate Manhattan Methodists asked Bishop Hedding to intervene. Hedding ruled against Green and Maffitt. Maffitt then sent a lawyer to Hedding formally denying his authority, while a note went to P. P. Sandford, the presiding elder of the New York District, and the Reverend Martindale, prohibiting both men from proceeding against him. The Reverend George Peck, head of the Methodist Book Concern, urged the Quarterly Conference of the Norfolk Street Church to pursue the allegations. Maffitt then threatened suit against Peck. Unfazed, the Quarterly Conference heard the charges, listened to the witnesses, and relieved Maffitt of his preaching certificate on March, 1847.24

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The *National Police Gazette*, a purveyor of lurid tales, criticized the concealed charges against Maffitt. Since the rumored allegations reputedly "involved the most heinous and detestable of human felonies," the paper favored a civil court to judge Maffitt, not an ecclesiastical body. By contrast, the *Christian Advocate and Journal* defended the ruling and reported the proceedings. Although Maffitt slapped a $50,000 slander suit against the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, the paper's coverage continued. The New York Methodist Conference upheld Hedding's ruling and suspended the Reverend Green for one year in 1848. By then, Maffitt's slander case had been defeated. 25

Long buried intellectual concerns about Maffitt's arose during the scandal. In leading the anti-Maffitt forces, George Peck battled both a moral transgressor and a intellectually-limited preacher. The *Christian Advocate*, the leading Methodist journal, where Peck worked, referred to Maffitt sarcastically as "professor," at one point remarking that "Everyone knows that John N. Maffitt never could adorn the ranks of literature." This was in reference to a failed attempt by Maffitt to edit a journal, *Calvary Tokens*, in Auburn, New York, in 1845 and 1846. Maffitt supporters derided Peck and his associates as an exclusive clique, who met at "the Great Methodist Book Concern" and formed a "sort of Inquisition of every thing done and said and enacted and conducted by Methodism throughout the United States." What Methodism should be, and who should personify it, had turned into a cultural war between the pro- and anti-Maffitt forces. 26

Rejected by the Conference, Maffitt could still work as a public speaker. However, Maffitt's marriage to Fanny Smith, the seventeen year old step-daughter of a Brooklyn judge, dashed hopes of an independent urban ministry. A torrent of negative publicity followed the couple, augmented by reports of the first Mrs. Maffitt's death in Texas. If Ann Maffitt was transformed into a paragon of domesticity, having raised her children alone, the second Mrs. Maffitt was depicted as vain woman of fashion. George T. Strong, the New York diarist, labeled John and Fanny "both snobs," and judged Maffitt "somewhat of a blackguard." The two separated after a brief marriage, with Fanny returning to her step-father. Her death in 1848 merely added to the rumors about the estranged couple, fueled by sensational stories from the *Police Gazette* that claimed Maffitt attempted to seduce Fanny with alcohol in a church basement, aided by his partner in crime, the Reverend Green. One story asserted that an abortion had been performed upon Fanny on a tabletop in Tarrytown, New York, Whatever the truth,

Maffitt’s ministry had been derailed.27

In 1848, Maffitt went to Arkansas joining the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. In Mobile, Alabama, Maffitt drew large crowds and stimulated “interesting revivals.” Once news of this reached New York City, the Police Gazette reiterated the charges against Maffitt. His followers held fast, but reports from New York City Methodists prompted southern Methodists to prohibit Maffitt from preaching. A distraught Maffitt allegedly said “God pity my enemies,” before dying of a heart attack in 1850.28

John Newland Maffitt’s death did not end the debate. Individuals quarreled over Maffitt, with Bishop Hedding’s 1855 biography enlivening discussion. George Peck wrote in the Christian Advocate and Journal in 1856 that Hedding’s ruling against Maffitt had been just; conversely, Rufus Hibbard, a Maffitt supporter, attacked Peck in an 1856 pamphlet. The exploits of John Newland Maffitt, Jr., a Confederate raider who destroyed union shipping during the Civil War, caused the Christian Advocate to recall John, Sr. as an “extraordinary” preacher, but the paper never alluded to his indiscretions. Past disgrace was best left unmentioned in this instance. In upstate New York, Maffitt supporters erected a monument to the preacher in the 1870s. Some Methodists clearly preferred to remember Maffitt as a champion of the faith, not an embarrassment.29

Maffitt’s demise resulted from a variety of forces. As a charismatic preacher, Maffitt found a niche in early Methodism, since his voice, features and dress epitomized what the Methodist church wished to become—a polished, mainstream faith attractive to middle-class audiences. Nagging doubts about Maffitt, in particular, his questionable behavior and modest intellectual attainments, remained below the surface. Yet the undercurrent of criticism bubbled over by the 1840s. Methodist officials could no longer ignore Maffitt questionable character; nor could his modest intellectual attainments be overlooked. For men such as George Peck, a leading New York City Methodist, the battle against Maffitt was both moral and cultural—an immoral and foppish minister needed to be stopped. The extent of Maffitt’s guilt may never be known, but the New York Methodist Conference was convinced that Maffitt suffered from ethical and stylistic failings.


29 (New York) Christian Advocate and Journal, February 7, 1856, April 2, 1863; Hibbard, startling Disclosures Concerning the Death of John N. Maffitt; Rice, Oration with Monumental Inscriptions, 6-7, 16; Memorial of Philip Embury: The First Methodist Minister in the New World (New York: Harrington and Brownell, 1888), 62.
Perhaps Thomas Low Nichols, a New England doctor, should have the final say. Nicholls remembered Maffitt as the "most striking celebrity" of his boyhood. It was Maffitt's fame, not his sanctity per se, that Nichols recalled. By creating a popular ministry Maffitt placed himself before the court of public opinion. And the clergy, Nichols observed, often remained the "slave rather than the leader and former of public opinion." Societal approval had launched Maffitt's career. Societal disapproval, augmented by growing denominational concerns, had eroded Maffitt's ministry.¹

¹ Nichols, Forty Years of American Life, 231, 233.