

The Black Maria

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The name "Black Maria" as applied to the closed police vans with separate locked cubicles used to convey prisoners to jail is a term of New England origin; the story connected with it being that back in the mid-1800s in Boston, Massachusetts, there lived a black woman named Maria Lee, who kept a lodging house for sailors. It was a waterfront place in the North End, where brawls were frequent. Maria, who was a large and powerful person, won a reputation for her ability to quell fights and bring offenders to jail. So successful was she in handling tough characters that the constables frequently enlisted her aid in bringing malefactors to book, and the story goes that when police wagons came into use in the 1830s, the Boston constables, remembering the great help the black woman had given them, immortalized her name in the term "Black Maria".

Black Maria was used in print publications of the period, and is still used today in parts of Britain and Australia for the vehicle that transports prisoners from "gaol" to court, and appearing in the song "Guns of Brixton" by The Clash. The term also exists in Norwegian, where the same vehicle is called "Maja" or "Svarte-Maja", in Icelandic as "Svarta Maria" and in Finnish as "Mustomaija". In Serbian, Croatian and Slovene, it is "marica" (with a small "m"), and as one of our website readers so aptly reminds us, in Stalin era Soviet Union the "Chernyy Voron" or "Voronok" was used to transport persons to exile in Siberia or other such places. The Black Maria is also called "Mothers Heart" as it is said that there is always room for one more.

Another tag, often used in association with such carriages, was "Paddy Wagon". The precise origin of the term is uncertain and disputed, though its use dates back to at least the beginning of the 1900s. There are at least three theories as how the phrase originated.

- The most prevalent theory is based on the term "Paddy" (derived from the common name Patrick) and was once a nickname for anyone of Irish descent. Since many of the early constables, or police officers, in the major east coast cities at the turn of the century were Irish their police vans were also called paddy wagons by association.
- An alternative theory is similarly based on the term "Paddy" but states that the term arose due to the number of immigrant Irish being arrested for having consumed too much alcohol and taken away in the paddy wagon.
- The final theory holds that the name originates from the padding used on the inside of police horse-drawn carriages to prevent injury; this last is regarded by lexicographers as an example of folk etymology.

According to newspaper accounts and other publications, including reports of the Saint Paul City Comptroller, our first paddy wagon or "Black Maria" was purchased and put into service on January 21, 1883, in conjunction with the opening of the new city workhouse. Built by the Fire Extinguisher Co. of Chicago for \$600, the carriage was an enclosed van type wagon designed to transport about twelve prisoners and contained two compartments to separate men from women. Drawn by a team of two draft horses, Patrolman John Rooney transported prisoners from the old courthouse located on Wabasha Street between Fourth and Fifth Streets to the city workhouse at 1165 N. Lexington Parkway (later the site of the Como Park swimming pool). It also made trips to and from the Central Station, downtown, and the four sub-stations:

- The Ducas Street Station (originally called Winslow Station) – located on the southeast corner of Robert and Delos Streets;
- The Margaret Street Station – located at what is now 745-747 Margaret Street;
- The Prior Avenue Station (originally called Union Park Station) – located at what was 490 North Prior Avenue; and
- The Rondo Street Station – located at the southeast corner of Rondo Street (now Concordia) and Western Avenue.

It should be noted that some publications suggest that two horse-drawn wagons may have been built under that first contract, the Black Maria operated by Rooney, and an open "patrol wagon" operated by Patrolman Pat Casey. As with the Mounted Patrolmen, drivers of the assorted wagons (teamsters) received an added stipend to their regular salary.

Although records don't pinpoint the exact date when the first paddy wagon was retired, records of the City Comptroller indicate that a "new workhouse van" was purchased from the J.H. Schurmeier Wagon & Carriage Co. of Saint Paul for \$325, less an allowance of \$25 for the "old van", on October 27, 1897. Originally located in a blacksmith shop at Sixth & Wall Streets in Saint Paul, the Schurmeier plant later moved to 328-330 East Ninth Street, which is now the home of twenty-two high-buck condominiums (Schurmeier Lofts).

The old horse-drawn workhouse van was sold, and lost for many years. In 1986 our Black Maria was located in Mayfield Village, Ohio, after changing hands at least three times. It was purchased for \$10,000 and returned to Saint Paul with the financial assistance of the City Council, the greater police community including Saint Paul Police Federation members, as well as donations from the general public.

In honor of that event and of the many donors involved, a zinc plaque was commissioned. And, although the old workhouse van continues to be on display at the new Western District Office in fine shape, the plaque did not stand the test-of-time quite so well. In fact, you could hardly read it anymore.

An inquiry was made of the lab folks at Saint Paul Stamp Works to see if there was anything that could be done to bring back the printing and artwork, to no avail, and a decision was made to have a duplicate made from a plastic resin type material that would look like the original, with two major exceptions:

- It would cost half as much as a zinc replacement; and
- It would last twice as long (almost indefinitely).

The cost to duplicate the original plaque, including artwork and 461 individual names and/or groups, came to \$931.80 w/tax... more than three times the cost of the original wagon. The plaque has been replaced and appropriately displayed in the Western District lobby alongside the Black Maria.

Stop in to the Western District lobby, 389 N. Hamline Avenue, between University Avenue and I-94, at your convenience and view the Black Maria and other historic displays as well.