

*The Wolfe Pack*  
*The Nero Wolfe*  
*Literary Society*

**The New York Times**  
ON THE WEB

August 24, 2003

## **New York Region**

### ***F.Y.I.*** ***Nero Wolfe? Try 454***

**MARGALIT FOX and GEORGE ROBINSON**

#### **Nero Wolfe? Try 454.**

**Q.** As a fan of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe books, I am hoping you can clear up an enduring mystery: Wolfe and his sidekick, Archie Goodwin, were said to have inhabited a house on West 35th Street. But exactly where on 35th Street did they live?

**A.** Nero Wolfe, a private detective of Holmesian intellect and Falstaffian girth (he was frequently described as weighing "a seventh of a ton"), starred in more than 70 books and stories published between 1934 and 1975. Throughout the series, the brownstone in which he and his rakish assistant, Archie Goodwin, live and work is meticulously described - in every detail but the address.

Wolfe aficionados can recite the features of the house in a near-fetishistic litany: First, the seven steps leading up from the street. Next, the panel of one-way glass that lets Archie give callers the once-over before they even get past the stoop. Inside, the front room, used mostly for stashing fugitive clients when the cops show up unannounced. Then, the well-appointed kitchen, with its two iceboxes (one always full of beer: Wolfe consumed six quarts a day), where four-star meals are prepared by Wolfe's in-house chef. The vast office, with its yellow drapes, the bookstand holding the second edition of Webster's Unabridged (Wolfe had owned the third edition but burned it on discovering it endorsed the use of "contact" as a verb), plus Wolfe's specially constructed chair, built to withstand 500 pounds. Upstairs are the bedrooms, and on the roof, the magnificent glassed-in plant rooms housing 10,000 orchids, accessible by an elevator that Wolfe had installed at the cost of 7,000 pre-1934 dollars.

As real as it all seems, where could it have been? Stout drops a few clues (the house is presumably on the south side of 35th Street, since a narrow alley behind Wolfe's rear garden cuts through to 34th). But mostly - tantalizingly - he obfuscates. When a house number is provided at all, it varies wildly from book to book, from 506 and 618 (near 11th Avenue) through 902, 924 and 938 (in the middle of the Hudson River).

There is, however, an official, if somewhat speculative, solution to the enigma. In 1996 the Wolfe Pack, a fan group ([www.nerowolfe.org](http://www.nerowolfe.org)), had a commemorative plaque affixed to a newly renovated building at No. 454, Wolfe's "probable residence," dedicated by Henry J. Stern, then the city's parks commissioner. The building, which incorporated two earlier town houses, provided subsidized housing for elderly and mentally ill tenants. Wolfe and his creator, both men of ardent liberal humanist convictions, would doubtless have approved.