Nero Wolfe’s Gotham: New York City in the 30s and 40s

Jim Picinich, New-York Historical Society Docent
1930s
Broadway in the 1930s

Bofinger, E.M. Times Square theaters by day, 46th and Broadway, south from 47th Street, New York City. January 1938. Photograph. NYC Municipal Archives.
Girl Crazy

- George Gershwin playing “I Got Rhythm” from Girl Crazy
Judge Joseph Force Crater

- **April 1930** - became an Associate Justice of the New York Supreme Court for New York County at the age of 41
- **Vanished** the night of **August 6, 1930**
- **Last seen** leaving a restaurant on West 45th Street
- **Dinner companions**, William Klein and Sally Lou Ritz, **originally said** they saw him get into a taxi cab
- **Later changed their story** saying they entered a taxi outside the restaurant while Crater walked down the street

Judge Joseph Force Crater

- Crater enjoyed New York City's nightlife
- Involved with several showgirls
- Was spending time at his summer home in Maine with his wife when he told her he must make a quick trip to NYC
- Traveled to NYC on August 3rd
- Promised to be back by her birthday August 9th
- At first Stella was upset that he had missed her birthday but assumed he had been held up on political or legal business
- His friends and colleagues thought he was in Maine
- After a week, Stella began telephoning his friends in New York
Grand Central Station

Chrysler Building

- Walter P. Chrysler commissioned architect William Van Alen to design a 40-story tower at 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue
- Ground breaking occurred on September 19, 1928
- Construction completed on May 20, 1930
- Chrysler Building opened on May 27, 1930
- Tallest building in the world from May 27, 1930 to April 30, 1931
The Empire State Building

- **Tallest building** in the world from 1931 to 1970
- **January 22, 1930** - Excavation begins
- **March 17, 1930** - Construction begins with 3,000 workers building 4.5 floors per week
- **April 1931** - At completion, it becomes the tallest building in the world
- **May 1, 1931** - President Herbert Hoover turns on the building's lights, officially opening it, by pressing a button in Washington, D.C.

Mayor Jimmy Walker

- Also known as "Beau James"
- Mayor of New York City from January 1, 1926 to September 1, 1932
- Style and exploits made his name synonymous with the Jazz Age
- Created the Department of Sanitation, unified New York’s public hospitals, improved many parks and playgrounds, and guided the Board of Transportation to enter into contract for the construction of an expanded subway system
- Known to conduct city business from a box seat in Yankee Stadium
- Resigned in 1932, after formal charges of corruption had been filed
- Walker left for Europe, divorcing his wife and marrying actress Betty Compton

New York, New York. Bread line beside the Brooklyn Bridge approach. between 1930 and 1935? 1 negative : safety ; 4 x 5 inches or smaller.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.
Fiorello LaGuardia

- Mayor of New York City from January 1, 1934 through December 31, 1945
- First descendant of Southern or Eastern European immigrants ever elected mayor of New York City
- His father was Italian, his mother was Jewish from Trieste in the Austro-Hungarian empire
Fiorello LaGuardia

- Long-time supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt, particularly the “New Deal”
- 20% of the jobs offered by the Civil Works Administration were based in NYC
- Four thousand projects employed 200,000 workers during the three-month-long program
- La Guardia competed aggressively for Public Works Administration and other federal funds
- By 1935, New York City was capturing one-seventh of the federal outlay for relief

Harris & Ewing. New York Mayor urges action on housing bill before adjournment. Washington, D.C., Aug 3. Asserting that thousands of inhabitants are living in cities in “firetraps” and “dangerous surroundings” Fiorello La Guardia, Mayor of New York City and President of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, appealed to the House Banking and Currency Committee today to speed action on the Wasgner-Steagall Housing Bill before adjournment. La Guardia said that he was representing his organization so that no time would be lost through duplication of testimony by other mayors, 8/3/37. [19]37 August 3. Photograph. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington.
Prohibition

[New York City Deputy Police Commissioner John A. Leach, right, watching agents pour liquor into sewer following a raid during the height of prohibition]. 1921? Photograph. New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.
Charles ‘Lucky’ Luciano

- Seen by many as the **father of modern organized crime** in America
- **First official boss** of the modern **Genovese crime family**
- Instrumental in the development of the **National Crime Syndicate** in the United States

Abe Reles

- Also known as "Kid Twist"
- Known for enforcing the law of the Mafia Families
- Ran a group called Murder Incorporated whose punishment for disobedience was death
- Implicated in a number of killings in 1940
- Realizing that he faced execution if convicted, Reles became a government witness
- Reles became known as "The Canary Who Could Sing, But Couldn't Fly"
Nancy Titterton

- 34-year-old writer and book reviewer
- Wife of Lewis Titterton, an NBC radio executive
- April 10th, 1936 - Good Friday
- Found dead in the empty bathtub in her apartment at 22 Beekman Place
- Police Commissioner Lewis Valentine assigned 65 detectives to the case
- Called in Alexander Gettler - Bellevue Hospital biochemist who was considered a forensics genius
Locale of Authoress’ Murder, a Baffling Mystery Story.

Diagram of the apartment in which Nancy Evans Tiverton was found strangled to death with a pair of pink pajamas.

The fashionable apartment house at 22 Beekman Place, Manhattan, in which the murder occurred, showing (a) the apartment and (b) the apartment of the Countess Alice Hoyos who, in describing a young intruder to police, has furnished the only tangible clue to date in the case.

Rubber-gloved detective holds the victim’s fountain pen found in the bedroom.

Detective at the Poplar St. laboratories, in Brooklyn, examining the fountain pen, under the microscope, for possible fingerprints. Note on the table, the knots in the pajamas with which the young author was strangled. Other clothes are those she wore when found in the dry bath tub.
Beekman Place


Inspector Francis Kear – “I regret to say that... in this case, clues are very scarce.”

When the body was removed from the tub, police found the killer had overlooked a 13-inch piece of string underneath the corpse.

Detectives found a single light-colored hair on the bedspread that was presumed to come from Mrs. Titterton.
Off for the death house in Sing Sing this afternoon went John Fiorenza, convicted slayer of Nancy Evans Titterton. Fiorenza is handcuffed to another prisoner, who is smiling because he is only going to serve a prison term.
Carnegie Deli

Max Schmeling

- Yankee Stadium - June 19, 1936
- Schmeling achieved a knockout in the twelfth after noticing a weakness when Louis threw a left jab
- Embraced by Hitler and the Nazis
- Portrayed as an example of German manhood and the superiority of the Aryan race
- Rematch - June 22, 1938
- The fight ended after two minutes and four seconds of the first round when Schmeling’s seconds threw in the towel
- Two of the most talked about boxing matches of the 20th Century

Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling

Abraham Lincoln Brigade

Picasso’s Guernica

50 years after the Gebhardt murder, the supermarket tabloid Weekly World News recalled the case in a piece that perfectly captured the sensationalist tone of the original coverage.

March 31, 1943

Reinhard Hardegan

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Brooklyn Navy Yard


The "Well", US Signal Corps Army Base Terminal, Port of Embarkation. Ration cases from crate cars are hoisted to warehouse bins for storage, ca. 1945-1946. NYC Municipal Archives.
Grumman Aircraft Factory in Bethpage, Long Island

Penicillin

- Brooklyn-based Charles Pfizer and company invented what would become the life saving miracle drug penicillin
- Only distributed to military personnel during the war
- At the war’s end Pfizer produced about 80 percent of all penicillin in the world

Research and Development Division, Schenley Laboratories, Inc., Lawrenceburg, Indiana
Rex Stout described himself as a "pro-Labor, pro-New Deal, pro-Roosevelt left liberal."

Two days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Rex Stout formed the Writers’ War Board (WWB)

WWB became known as the “greatest propaganda machine in history”
‘Lucky’ Luciano

- 1943 - Luciano incarcerated at Dannemora prison in upstate New York
- Sometime between May 15th and June 4th, 1942, Meyer Lansky and a lawyer visited Luciano in prison to discuss working with Naval Intelligence
- Lansky explained that by co-operating with Naval intelligence, Lucky might well get a reduction of his sentence
- Luciano said he was happy to help the government
- Luciano knew the important people on the waterfront and if he asked them to get interested in the war effort – then they would

1945

- Germany surrendered - May 7, 1945
- Formally announced the next day
- **August 6th & 9th** - U.S. planes dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of **Hiroshima** and **Nagasaki**
- **Bombs** were products of **Manhattan Project** research that began here in **1939**
- **Japan** officially surrendered on September 2, 1945 aboard the **USS Missouri**—a battleship built in the **Brooklyn Navy Yard**
- **Crowded ships** brought American troops back to **New York harbor**