

## THE DISTRICT

# Florida House on Capitol Hill serves as only state embassy

By Merlisa Lawrence Corbett  
Special to The Washington Examiner

Once a dilapidated structure, the white three-story row house on Capitol Hill called the Florida House now receives nearly 10,000 visitors per year. Inside, they can expect a daily offering of Florida

orange juice and an elegant interior worthy of the home's unofficial status as the country's only state embassy.

Built in 1891, the home's interior reflects the era in which it was constructed. Turning the house into a state embassy was the idea of Rhea Chiles, widow of former U.S. Sen. and Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles.

The idea came to Rhea Chiles in the late 1960s when they were visiting Washington with their children and got lost on Embassy Row. One of the children reportedly said, "Let's go to Florida's embassy and they will tell us where we are."

After explaining that only foreign countries had embassies, Rhea Chiles became intrigued by the idea. After her husband was elected to the Senate in 1971, she saw a for-sale sign on an abandoned building. Windows were knocked out, the second floor was caved in, and homeless people were living in the basement. With the help of donors, she purchased the building in 1972 for \$125,000. Today it is valued at more than \$1 million.

"The house is supported solely by Floridians, not the state of Florida," said Bart Hudson, president of the Florida House. "Every state has a society. No other state has a house."

The Italianate Victorian sits at the corner of Second and East Capitol streets NE. In fact, the original address was 200 East Capitol St., but the entrance on East Capitol was sealed. Second Street became the functioning entrance and gave the building a new address.

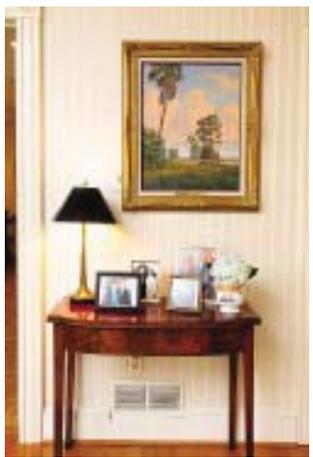
"Mrs. Chiles liked the address Number One Second Street better than 200 East Capitol," Hudson said.

No one lives at the Florida House and it doesn't accommodate overnight guests. But an antique writing desk is available on the third floor, as well as free wireless Internet for visitors who may need to get some work done. Otherwise, the house is meant to be a place where Floridians can stop by for a brief rest.

The third floor of the structure collapsed in 1982, and since then the house has seen major structural and interior renovations.

"We wanted the interior to be appropriate to the age of the house and the purpose," said Elizabeth Lindsay, an interior designer and board member who serves on the Florida House interiors committee.

Colorful stained-glass transoms over some of the windows in the living room are original to the house. Simple and elegant, the interior features pieces mostly from the



PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Turning a 1891 row house on Capitol Hill into a state embassy was the idea of Rhea Chiles, widow of former U.S. Sen. and Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles.

1800s. The upholstered pieces are reproductions.

Many of the tables, cabinets and case pieces are satinwood Federal inlaid mahogany, with values topping tens of thousands of dollars. The jewel of the collection is a Butler's Bureau Bookcase secretary, circa 1790, with a drop-down front desk, located in the main stateroom.

Across from the secretary and above a coral-colored sofa is an Asian-inspired silk screen, a gift from Frances Wolfson, an internationally known artist from Miami. The piece depicts the mockingbird, the state bird, and the orange tree, showing the blossoms, the state flower and the fruit.

Former first lady Barbara Bush came to Florida House to view the silk screen and liked it so much she

chose pieces by Wolfson to give as gifts to officials during a visit to China.

Seashells and corals adorn a 120-year-old mantle over the fireplace.

The mantle, a gift from Rhea Chiles, was made in Ireland, destination of the Gulf Stream, the warm Atlantic Ocean current that originates in Florida.

The walls in the house are used as a rotating art gallery. On display these days are paintings by the Florida Highwaymen, 26 black artists who sold their paintings in the segregated South alongside Florida highways during the 1950s and '60s. Depicting vivid sunsets and sunrises over Florida landscapes, these paintings often were found in hotels.

"Mrs. Chiles thought it would be great if all of Second Street was State Embassy Row," Hudson said. "Other states have tried and failed. We are very fortunate."

### Where to find it:

» [floridaembassy.com](http://floridaembassy.com)



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