



Plant Riverside District will transform Savannah's historic riverfront into a vibrant new entertainment destination.

## Telling a Story

An Interview with Richard Kessler, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, The Kessler Enterprise, Inc.



Grand Bohemian Hotel Greenville is a designed lodge that will offer 187 guestrooms, suites and lofts with views overlooking the Reedy River and Falls Park.

**EDITORS' NOTE** Richard Kessler has been Chairman and CEO of The Kessler Enterprise since 1984. He was former Chairman, President, and Chief Executive Officer of Days Inn of America and former Chairman of Lutheran Brotherhood based in Minneapolis. Among The Kessler Enterprise's projects are The Kessler Collection of themed hotels and resorts, the 500-acre Silverwood Plantation residential community, the 1,000-acre Georgia North International Industrial Park, as well as commercial land developments. In December 2018, Kessler was featured as one of Florida's 500 Most Influential Business Leaders by Florida Trend magazine. In 2000, Kessler was named the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur Of The Year™ for the State of Florida. Kessler has bachelor and master's degrees in engineering from Georgia Tech.



Richard Kessler

and it was profitable the first year and I knew I was onto something. The next year we bought land in Orlando, Florida and built another boutique hotel. It was also very successful right away. This told me back in the early '80s that I was onto something with this idea of an independent boutique hotel.

I did some other things, including running Days Inn, which we sold in September 1984. In 1995, I started a company called Grand Theme Hotels and moved to Florida to develop four-star level themed hotels.

I quickly opened two of them and both were very successful, so I knew I was back on the right trail with this idea. I then morphed the Grand Theme Hotels into The Kessler Collection. I changed the name of the company because, at the time, people saw themed hotels as too Disneyesque and they didn't understand the quality that we were providing.

**COMPANY BRIEF** The Kessler Collection's ([kesslercollection.com](http://kesslercollection.com)) portfolio of passionately created and artistically inspired boutique hotels boast chic design, luxe accommodations, enriching ambiance and intuitive service. Each hotel's exquisite art, music and cultural influences are deliberately approachable. Kessler guests are bathed in redefined Bohemian luxury whether at an 1888 historic hotel, a cutting-edge downtown landmark, a magical castle, an earthy Native American mountain lodge, a high-design southern mansion or an elite ski lodge. The Kessler Collection was the founding member in 2010 of the Marriott Autograph Collection which was launched with seven Kessler Collection Hotels and today Autograph Collection has 400 hotels worldwide.

### Will you discuss your vision in creating The Kessler Collection and how the business has evolved?

The seed of the idea came in 1979 while I was traveling in Europe. I saw boutique hotels scattered all over Europe and even though they were under no brand flags, they were successful and charming. This prompted me to build the Mulberry Inn in Savannah, Georgia in 1980. That was before the "boutique" trend had even been thought about in America. Little was said about hotel art and music or boutique hotels at that time.

The Mulberry Inn was very successful from the day it opened. It just started off with a boom



The lobby of the JW Marriott Savannah at Plant Riverside District

Today, we have nine operating Kessler Collection boutique hotels and we have three more under construction soon to be finished.

### What does the word boutique mean to you and is it still the way you would characterize The Kessler Collection today?

The whole idea of boutique, in the generic sense, has morphed into something that's frankly not boutique anymore. People are confusing a lifestyle hotel with boutique. We now have 1,000-room hotels calling themselves boutique. In my definition of a boutique hotel, a 1,000-room property is not boutique, but it may be a lifestyle hotel.

A boutique hotel has a sense of intimacy and smallness. In my experience, when you hit 300 rooms in any hotel, the operation changes and the feel of it changes. Over the years, we have learned that you can push the number to approximately 250 rooms if you design it right and are very careful about the size of the spaces you create. Generally, the boutique feeling is best maintained if you stay under 200 rooms.

We're developing a 256-room property in Charlotte which will be open in March of next year. It will be boutique and will have a quaint feeling to it. We've given it a colorful Argentine theme. If you give it an interesting theme that has a story, it can be boutique. That is one of the deciding factors and is why a lot of these larger hotels can't be boutique – they're too big to really tell a story or have a feeling of intimacy. It's most important that a boutique hotel has a feeling of intimacy.

### Is it challenging to find properties that have a story and fit within the Collection?

First, you just have to have an eye for it. You have to know what you're looking for. For example, when I was looking at Greenville, South Carolina sites, the broker showed me three. Two of them were on Main Street and were good sites but I was struggling to come up with what would really make them stand out with a storyline. I went to look at the third site which was downtown. Walking across an Italian designed curving bridge, I discovered a site on the river with a waterfall overlooking a scenic park. I instantly knew it was the site we would buy.

We're developing that property now. Since it feels like you're in the middle of a forest, I decided to build a mountain lodge because you feel like you're in the hills of South Carolina. It will be a very iconic hotel. My point is that if you have an eye for what you're looking for, there are unique opportunities out there.

### Is brand awareness for The Kessler Collection name important or is it more about promoting the individual properties?

It's both. In most cases, we are using the Grand Bohemian name for the properties within The Kessler Collection. Grand Bohemian suggests a feeling of freedom and it suggests something unorthodox. While each property becomes its own brand, it's certainly identified and known as a Grand Bohemian and as a member of The Kessler Collection of "inspiring places." ●