Abolitionist and Liberty Party member Henry S. Ranney built his home in 1785 on a hillside property by what is today Conway Road in Ashfield. A farmer and peddler, Ranney traveled to local towns making sales — but also spreading his ideas.

The property changed hands many times over the next two centuries, with barns and other smaller buildings popping up to serve current owners. Today, that property is the home of Double Edge Theatre and known as “the Farm.”

And, like Ranney, the people who live there are self-sustained travelers who deliver ideas along with their craft.

“It grows and develops,” Double Edge Founder and Artistic Director Stacy Klein said, looking at a set of wall art in the Double Edge main office — from left, a 19th-century painting of “the Farm,” a 1950s aerial photo taken by a cropduster and a smaller painting of the property done just last year.

Double Edge is celebrating its 25th anniversary in Ashfield this year. Founded in Boston in 1982, Double Edge has become a world-famous ensemble theater, traveling nationally and internationally, putting on approximately 30 performances each summer, and hosting a diverse group of actors who live, train, work the land and run the Double Edge business at “the Farm.”

110 acres of theater

Actors, who come from all corners of Europe, South America, Africa and Asia, stay in an 1830s-built guest house while they participate in Double Edge’s seasonal programs. They hone their acting skills, work and participate in performances.

The theater is funded via ticket sales, tuition from acting students, grants, sponsorships and, in large part, donations from patrons and participants.

The artist-led theater also showcases original performances for often sold-out crowds in the barn, on painted canoes in the pond, on bridges across the property’s small creek — all across the former dairy farm. The 110-acre property, Klein said, is one that has become part of the theater’s identity and inspiration.

“We feel very moved,” Klein said. “I think it’s given us so much.”

The property — like Double Edge, which was first housed in a church in Allston, before spending years in the 1980s and 1990s traveling in central Europe for its “Republic of Dreams” series of performances — evolves, Klein said.

“The extent of Double Edge spectacles use all of that land up there. The pond is also a site for performances,” Klein said, pointing toward the hillside area, where the remnants of a maze used for events last fall still stands.

Tucked among the snowed-over foliage next to a small pond on the property are set pieces, a bridge and a trapeze rigging, all pieces of the theater’s performances.

As the property ages, decorations pop up on the walls on the inside and outside of the buildings — painted masks, portraits and mirrors. Almost all of them, Klein said, are from past performances.
‘A boy living a childhood dream’

“The Farm” has affected the lives of many people over the years, and Co-Artistic Director Carlos Uriona is the first to admit it.

Uriona is an actor and creator with Double Edge. He has been a lead actor in many of the theater’s performances since joining the ensemble in 1996, like “Leonora and Alejandro.”

Originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina, Uriona was a street performer and puppeteer, who organized groups of actors in a national political and cultural resistance against the Argentine military dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s. He formed groups like Teatro del Ateneo and Nucleo de Artistas del Sur and, in 1985, he was one of the founding members of the Movimiento de Teatro Popular, a group of theaters that collaborated to bring performances to unconventional venues like factories.

Uriona had a full life, but came to Double Edge and never left. “The Farm,” he said, is where he feels he truly belongs.

“I was recently writing to an Argentinian playwright, and he said, ‘It’s like the dream of a kid that (Uriona) got here,’ and that’s how I feel,” Uriona said. “I am a boy living a childhood dream.”

Developing a future

And, to Uriona and Klein, living that dream isn’t just about acting, helping develop others’ skills or creating emotional and acrobatic performances, but developing “the Farm.”

“It’s kind of a living being,” Klein said. “There’s more people now, more in the audience, so we need to keep developing things.”

A new kitchen is being built in what was a garage, and Klein said it should be finished before the summer, when around 25 people — from Africa, Europe, Asia, South America, “everywhere,” — are on “the Farm” and need to be fed during the Summer Spectacle Immersion program. The old kitchen will become an archives area.

Also, keeping with the theater’s niche of outdoor performances with lots of movement — even among the audience — Klein is constantly looking for new performance areas on the property. She’s gotten quite creative before, with one performance in the culvert that abuts the road and boundary of the property.

Finally, the last of the property’s future growth, as Klein envisions it, would be replacing the beams in the main indoor performance area, and then expanding that area to allow the theater to host large indoor performances during the winter.

“This is our gorgeous space, beautiful space,” Klein said, standing in the cavernous wooden barn edged with props. “My last thing, I want to expand this barn so we can have indoor performances in the winter. I think our community deserves it.”

The changing land and theater are both in sync with the theater’s mantra of “living culture,” a motto that also leads the group to find ways to be more self-sustainable on the property. The ensemble is always finding ways of “going green,” Klein said, building its own irrigation system and banning single-use plastic bags.

They grow their own vegetables, raise chickens and goats — and even a skunk who has wandered into the building with other animals — and strive to be sustainable in the same manner early farmers at the property would have been.

“We have understood the environment’s role as the embracer of all creativity,” Klein said.

On May 5, a community celebration and meal will take place marking the 25th anniversary at “the Farm,” Klein said.

“We’re going to open up the space, have people come and talk about their experiences here, read about different aspects of Double Edge,” Klein said.
One exercise during a recent open training session at Ashfield’s Double Edge Theatre involved running, high fiving and dancing with one another. Staff Photo/Melina Bourdeau

Following instructor Carlos Uriona, students at Double Edge Theatre’s open training session lean on a spool and reach up. Staff Photo/Melina Bourdeau

Bottom Left: Rocío Pérez, of Madrid, Spain, walks on the spool with assistance from a classmate and instructor during a two-hour open training session at Ashfield’s Double Edge Theatre. Staff Photo/Melina Bourdeau

Ana Candida of Boston and Lily Hargis of Ashfield jump together as part of a recent open training session at Double Edge Theatre. Staff Photo/Melina Bourdeau
(From top, counterclockwise) Susannah Wilson, Will MacAdams, Isabel Shaida and Carlos Uriona move a basketball without using their hands during an open training session at Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield. Staff Photo/Melina Bourdeau

Double Edge Theatre Founder and Artistic Director Stacy Klein, right, stands for a photo with Co-Artistic Director Carlos Uriona at “the Farm” in Ashfield. Staff Photo/Dan Little

Indoor performance space in the barn at Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield. Staff Photo/Dan Little

Costumes at the indoor performance space in the barn at Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield. Staff Photo/Dan Little

Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield. Staff Photo/Dan Little

Double Edge Theatre Founder and Artistic Director Stacy Klein, left, stands for a photo with Co-Artistic Director Carlos Uriona at “the Farm” in Ashfield. Staff Photo/Dan Little
Co-Artistic Director Carlos Uriona walks through the grounds at Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield. Staff Photo/Dan Little

Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield. Staff Photo/Dan Little