

Ashigaru (Foot Soldiers) Residences

In the Kaga domain (feudal-era Ishikawa centered on Kanazawa), *ashigaru* (foot soldiers) lived in designated residential areas called *kumi-chi*. These areas had plots of land in a row, with about ten plots per row. The approximate size of the plots—each allocated to a single family—was either 165 or 230 m².

Each plot of land was surrounded by hedges and divided into a space for the house and a space for the garden. *Ashigaru* houses were single-story structures between 66 and 82 m² in area. They often had a main entrance in the gable end of the building (an arrangement called *tsumairi*). They had roofs of wood shingles held down with field stones, as the structures were not strong enough to support heavier clay tiles that would have been reserved for buildings of higher status. Drainage was arranged as required. The rest of the land around the house was used as a garden. Here *ashigaru* grew vegetables or cultivated peach, plum, persimmon, and other fruit-bearing trees.

The houses of *ashigaru* in the Kaga domain were fully detached dwellings. This was rare during the Edo period (1603–1867), as *ashigaru* in most other domains lived in rows of tenements called *nagaya* (literally “longhouses”). Individual units in these long tenement ranges were divided by insubstantial internal cross-walls. Most amenities were shared and private space was limited. By comparison, *ashigaru* families in Kaga enjoyed a higher level of residential comfort. Although compact, the Kaga houses with their individual gardens were independent of one another.

A unique feature of Kaga domain *ashigaru* housing was the spatial subdivision of the interior: areas for entertaining guests were typically separated from private family space. Guest spaces consisted of a formal entryway (*genkan*), an entrance hall (*genkan no ma*), and a guest reception room (*ashiki*), arranged in a line on one side of the house. The kitchen (*nagashi*), family living room (*cha no ma*, literally “tea room”), and sleeping room/work room (*nando* and *kagi no ma*) also formed a set on the other side of the building, and were largely private.

These compact, single-family *ashigaru* homes became the model for the detached houses that became popular in Japan after modernization began in 1868. True modern houses often have two stories, but two-story structures were prohibited in Kaga during the Edo period. Not only was it considered insulting to walk over the top of another person, or to look down on someone of superior rank, anything suggesting an attempt to rival the height of the town’s focal castle was prohibited.