

Former Onokoba Elementary School

Onokoba Elementary School opened in 1882, and soon became a center of the local community where parents and neighbors would often join students in festivals and sporting events. In 1991, the building was hit by a wave of pyroclastic flow, destroying the interior completely.

The school building has been left exactly as it was after the disaster as a memorial to the damage caused by the Heisei Eruptions of 1990–1995. The majority of the destruction caused by the eruptions was due to devastating pyroclastic flow and lahars, fast-moving mudslides.

Pyroclastic flow is a mixture of hot gases, ash, and volcanic rock that travels at tremendous speed. During the first half of 1991, large amounts of lava bubbled out of the mountain above Shimabara, creating unstable domes of molten rock. On June 3, 1991, one of the domes collapsed, creating a wall of pyroclastic flow that killed 43 people but missed the school, giving those inside a chance to evacuate. The neighborhood was quickly declared a hazard area, and the school was abandoned.

On September 15, 1991, another lava dome collapsed, and the school was not as lucky this time. Although the majority of the stones and rubble in the pyroclastic flow traveled down the valley behind the school, the buildings were hit with the full force of the ash and gas cloud. The resulting fire shattered windows, twisted metal, and charred surrounding plants.

The school now stands as a memorial—a testament to the power of the volcano and a thankful reminder that no one was harmed. The ginkgo tree next to the empty building began to bud the following year, despite having been scorched in the fire, and came to be seen as a symbol of hope and rejuvenation.