

## Saigo Takamori Okuyama House and Pine Tree

Beneath this ancient pine tree in the mid-nineteenth century, one of history's most famous samurai contemplated the future of Japan at a major turning point in its history.

Saigo Takamori (1828-1877) was a retainer belonging to the Satsuma clan. He believed it was time for sovereignty to be transferred from the ruling Tokugawa shogunate, which was near collapse, to the emperor. In 1862, he was arrested in Edo and sentenced to exile on Tokunoshima for his anti-shogunate activities, then to the more remote island of Okinoerabu, south of the Amami Islands.

He ended up spending 17 days on this island, all here at the Okuyama family home. He spent so much time under this large pine tree in the garden, pondering his vision for the nation, that the tree became known as the *koshikake-matsu*, or "seat pine."

Saigo's imposing bulk and powerful jaw made a strong impression on the islanders. So did his vision for a better Japan, which included such declarations as, "Public servants must be righteous. Only then can they lead the people," and "I will give everything I have for the nation, so I beg you also to grit your teeth and do your best."

Saigo was pardoned in 1864 and returned to the mainland. There he became a central player in the Meiji Restoration of 1868, prior to which the shogun resigned and the seat of power was returned to the emperor. He was given a senior post in the new regime, but later resigned over what he considered excessive westernization and other issues. He led an unsuccessful rebellion against the imperial government in 1877 and, after being shot twice, died at his own hand. His life story loosely inspired the 2003 Hollywood film *The Last Samurai*.

Saigo is admired in Japan for his idealism and bravery.