

Nakaosaka Iron Mine and Ironworks

Mining began at Nakaosaka Iron Mine, just north of Shimonita, in the 1840s, making it one of Japan's earliest iron ore mines. High-grade magnetite iron ore was found in Nakaosaka in sufficient quantities to make the mining effort worthwhile, even in early times before the introduction of modern iron smelting.

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the mine was briefly taken over by the government, and one of the three most significant iron works in industrializing Japan was built there. Later, the mine was privatized. With the help of Western advisors and ready access to essential components such as coal and lime, Western-style blast furnaces made Nakaosaka the most modern steel mill in Japan by the turn of the century. The steel works reached its peak in the World War I years. The refinery closed after that, with limited mining continuing until 1961.

The site is now a ruin. From the gate, visitors can see the tracks where minecarts once ran, as well as remnants of the blast furnaces.

Suwa Shrine

The principal shrine of Shimonita is Suwa-jinja Shinto shrine. While the exact age of the shrine is uncertain, the zelkova tree standing on the grounds is known to be at least 650 years old, and may offer an indication of the shrine's age.

The shrine was originally dedicated to Hachiman, the deification of the semi-legendary fifteenth Japanese emperor, Ojin, who is believed to have lived in the latter half of the fourth century. When warlord Takeda Shingen (1521–1573) campaigned through the area during the Warring States period (1467–1568), he arranged rites to re-dedicate the shrine to Suwa no Kami, the god of valor and duty. The Takeda family had a long-standing affinity with Suwa no Kami and it is likely that Shingen believed installing Suwa no Kami at the Shimonita-jinja Shinto shrine would aid his war efforts.

The current shrine is a relatively small structure believed to have been built in the late 1830s by master carpenters brought in for the task from the Lake Suwa area in present-day Nagano Prefecture. The building is constructed in the style commonly used by Suwa area builders: a main shrine with an inner shrine behind it connected by rainbow-shaped beams. The gables, eaves, and transoms are elaborately carved with plants and mythical creatures.

Suwa Shrine is part of a network of more than 10,000 Suwa shrines across Japan. The head shrine is Suwa Grand Shrine, one of the oldest shrines in Japan, which is located on the shore of Lake Suwa.

The Battle of Shimonita

There was substantial social and political upheaval in Japan in the waning days of the Tokugawa shogunate, which governed Japan from 1603–1867. The Tengu Party was one of various factions that had opposing views on the best way to respond to demands from domains in the western part of the country that Japan be opened to trade. These factions believed it was time for the shogunate to end and for power to be restored to the emperor.

The Battle of Shimonita, fought on November 16, 1864, was a skirmish between troops sent by the shogunate and a rebel group known as the Tengu Party originating in the Mito domain in present day Ibaraki Prefecture. The Tengu Party was passing through Shimonita on its way to Kyoto to show support for the emperor when they were caught by the shogun's troops.

The battle lasted only a few hours, but it was a significant event for Shimonita, which had never been a battlefield before (and has never again since). The town still bears battle scars, including bullet holes in the outer walls of a local storehouse. Nearby is one of several stone markers in the town commemorating parts of the conflict and the lives lost. More details are contained in an exhibit at the local history museum.

The shogun's troops failed to stop the rebels at Shimonita. They lost the battle and returned to their domain. The Tengu Party eventually had to abandon their journey to Kyoto and return home when they ran short of supplies.