

Kita no Sōmon Gate

The Kita no Sōmon (Northern Main Gate), was one of only three possible entrances to the heavily fortified castle. Along with the Naka no Sōmon (Middle Gate) and Hiyako no Sōmon (Hiyako Gate), the gate was monitored extremely closely as it provided access to the *sannomaru*, the outermost bailey of Hagi Castle. During daylight hours, guards scrutinized everyone who passed through the gate. At night, the guards locked the gates and only allowed those with special permits to enter.

The samurai retainers to the Mōri family lived within the *sannomaru*. Although they were protected by a moat and a wall, their streets were designed to slow down any invading force that breached the castle's outer defenses. However, the outer defenses were never breached, and the gates were removed in 1871, after the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867) had come to an end. In doing so, the Meiji government (1868–1912) gave ordinary citizens unrestricted access to the fortifications that had once been closed to them. The dismantling of not only the gates but the rest of the castle's structures in following years reflected the newfound mindset of the Meiji era—a period that marked the end of samurai rule and the open embrace of Western ideas and technology.

The gate that stands today is a replica erected in 2004 as part of the 400-year anniversary celebrations of the founding of the Chōshū domain. Built based on historical records, it is what is known as a *wakito-tsuki kōraimon*, featuring a wicket door and small gabled roofs on the inside that shelter the doors when open. The gate's main pillars are set 5.9 meters apart and 7 meters high, and it is one of the largest such structures in Japan. Its pillars and beams are made of rare and expensive zelkova wood (*keyaki*), which increased the expense for the gate to around 100 million yen, or 950,000 US dollars.