

Takehara Townscape Conservation Area

Takehara has a 350-year history as a merchant town famous for salt production and sake brewing. It is known as the “Little Kyoto of Aki” (Aki being the name of the province that later became Hiroshima Prefecture) due to its collection of historic buildings.

Honmachi-dori, the 500-meter-long main street of the historic district, is lined on both sides with traditional wooden merchant houses and townhouses that feature light-gray plaster walls, latticework facades, and fired clay roof tiles. The well-preserved buildings date from the Edo period (1603–1867) and reflect the success of the town’s merchants.

The elaborate style of *kawarabuki* (fired clay roof tiles) and *koshi* (decorative latticework) on the front of the buildings was one way that the local merchants could display their wealth. The latticework designs can be classified into three distinct types: *degoshi* (protruding), which is often used on the ground floor; *hiragoshi* (flat); and *nurigoshi* (plastered). Toward the end of the Edo period, improvements in latticework techniques allowed not only for vertical designs but also horizontal bar designs.

Two excellent examples of the merchant houses are the former residence of the Yoshii family and the former residence of the Matsusaka family.

The Yoshii residence, built in 1691, is the oldest house remaining in Takehara. It was originally the home of a wealthy salt and sake merchant who became a town official. The residence was used as accommodation for the local lord when he visited the area.

The Matsusaka residence was constructed in the 1820s and completely remodeled in 1879. It has gently curved roof tiles in the *kawarabuki* style and elaborate latticework on the facade. The garden features a view of Fumeikaku (Kannon Hall) at Saihoji Temple in the tradition of borrowed scenery (*shakkei*). This principle of East Asian garden design incorporates background views into the composition of a garden.

During the Edo period (1603–1867), Takehara became a salt-making center. Its wide, shallow bay was conducive to salt production due to extremes of high and low tide of the Seto Inland Sea. The salt merchants used a salt-making process adapted from a method used in the Ako domain (present-day Hyogo Prefecture). The channeled method *irihama enden* allowed them to efficiently produce salt. In 1650, a channel was dug to the town center to aid in the processing of salt and the development of the salt trade.

Salt was sent to Osaka and then on to Edo (present-day Tokyo). It was also transported in *kitamaebune* trading ships from the Seto Inland Sea. The ships initially headed west to pass between Honshu and Kyushu via the Kanmon Straits (separating Honshu and Kyushu) before turning to head north to various ports on the Japan Sea, including in Akita and Hokkaido prefectures in northern Japan. These ships returned to Takehara with rice, an important commodity during this period.

In 2019, Takehara was designated a Japan Heritage site as a port of call for *kitamaebune* ships.

Today, restaurants, cafes, and craft shops selling traditional local crafts are located in some of Takehara’s historic buildings. The residents in the historic district arrange flowers outside

their homes as a sign of hospitality and look forward to seeing visitors to the area. The historic district was selected as an Important Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings by the Japanese government in 1982.