

Former Sawahara Residence

The Sawahara Family

The Sawahara family played a prominent role in Kure's history over many generations. In 1886, when Kure was chosen as the location for a major naval base, it was Sawahara Shigetarō Tametsuna (1839–1923) who represented Kure as city headman in the negotiations with the Imperial Navy. At this time, the Sawahara Residence guesthouse that had been built 80 years earlier became the temporary home of the naval commander-in-chief. Later, the Sawahara residence was one of the few large-scale structures in Kure to survive the air raids at the end of World War II (1939–1945).

While the Sawahara family successfully negotiated with the Allied occupying forces to keep the main building and the Triple Warehouse, the New Warehouse and a nearby secondary residence were both seized for use by the British Commonwealth Occupying Forces. Both properties were returned to the Sawahara family in 1952, and shortly thereafter the secondary residence was sold off and torn down. The family transferred ownership of the estate to the city of Kure in 2001 but retained the right to reside there. The Former Sawahara Residence was designated a national Important Cultural Property in 2005. It is the only building in Kure not related to the Imperial Navy to be granted this recognition.

The Sawahara Residence

The history of the residence extends back to 1728, when the Sawahara merchant family began living there. A fire in 1740 destroyed most of the complex's original structures, but the family rebuilt. A guesthouse for high-ranking visitors was added to the complex in 1805 in response to news that Asano Ukyō, a young lord from the Hiroshima domain, would be visiting the following year. The Sawahara family had become wealthy through their brewery business, and the task of hosting prestigious visitors naturally fell to them. The Sawahara residence was well suited to hosting such guests: the rooms of the guesthouse were decorated with luxurious furnishings, such as *yakusugi* cedar wood taken from ancient trees on the distant island of Yakushima and carved transom panels (*ranma*) depicting the arched bridge and lanterns of Hiroshima's famed Itsukushima Jinja Shrine.

In 1805, in preparation for Lord Asano's visit, the family also built an *onarimon*, a special entrance exclusively for high-ranking guests. However, when Lord Asano's officials assessed the gate, they determined it to be overly ornate for a merchant's residence and

reprimanded the Sawahara family for forgetting their place. The family hastily sawed off the gate's long, decorative crossbars and covered the shortened ends with wooden boxes that remain to this day.

This incident reflects the power shift that occurred between the samurai and merchant classes during the latter half of the Edo period (1603–1867) as the merchant class grew increasingly affluent. Despite their greater wealth, the merchants remained lower in social rank than the samurai, and they were expected to refrain from extravagances that were normally reserved for the houses and lifestyles of the ruling class.

Architectural Features

The residence's Triple Warehouse (Mitsugura) was erected in 1809, and it has since become a symbol of Kure. The street-facing side of this trio of warehouses was used as a backdrop for multiple scenes in the 2016 animated movie *In This Corner of the World*. The Triple Warehouse is noted for its unique “straw raincoat walls” (*minokabe*), which are built by layering plaster and woven straw. The technique is uncommon, and very few historical buildings with *minokabe* still exist.

Although the Triple Warehouse appears from the street to be a single, joined structure, it actually consists of three separate buildings. The buildings on the left and right are nearly identical, but the central warehouse displays some architectural differences. For example, the warehouses on either side have wooden-lattice windows, whereas the windows of the central warehouse have metal lattices and are slightly smaller. The roofs of the warehouses vary as well; while the buildings on the left and right have ordinary tile roofing, the central warehouse has a pantile roof with curved, S-shaped tiles. The New Warehouse (Shingura) that stands nearby was built in 1905 and is the most modern addition to the Sawahara residence.

The Triple Warehouse was once used to store the Sawahara family's extensive collection of historical documents, which chronicle Kure's history and development during the late Edo period. These historical records were designated a Tangible Cultural Property by the city of Kure in 1982, and they are now archived at the Irifuneyama Memorial Museum.