

Tenman Jinja Shrine

Tenman Jinja Shrine is said to mark the location of a visit by renowned scholar, poet, and aristocrat Sugawara no Michizane (845–903). While traveling from Kyoto to the Kyushu region, Michizane is believed to have stopped in Mitarai and washed his hands at a well. This episode became the origin of the name “Mitarai,” which literally translates to “honorably washing one’s hands.” After his death, Michizane was deified as Tenman Daijizai Tenjin, the Shinto deity of scholarship and writing. The first Shinto shrine dedicated to Tenjin in Mitarai was built in 1755 on the grounds of Manshūji Temple. In 1871, a new shrine was built next to the well at which Michizane is believed to have washed his hands, and the statue from the original shrine at Manshūji was moved to its current location at Tenman Jinja Shrine. The current shrine building was constructed in 1917 using donations from the residents of Mitarai.

A torii gate stands at the entrance to the shrine, marking the transition into sacred space. The path is lined with cherry trees. Facing toward the shrine, on the left side stands the traditional washbasin for rinsing one’s hands and mouth before praying. This washbasin is shaped like a large inkstone to symbolize the temple’s connection to scholarship and writing. Alongside the washbasin is a *fudezuka*, a memorial for worn-out calligraphy brushes. Memorials like it are often found at shrines to Tenjin. To the right of the path is a large stone monument dedicated to Michizane that has been engraved with one of his poems. The text expresses his deep humility and respect for the people who helped him in life. A second stone monument honors Nakamura Harukichi (1871–1945), an adventurer born in Mitarai who traveled around the world by bicycle between 1902 and 1903 and was rumored to be a spy.

Stairs lead up from the pathway to the shrine’s worship hall and main sanctuary (*honden*), where Tenjin is enshrined. A tunnel called the “gate of possibility” (*kanō-mon*) passes below the *honden* and leads to the back of the shrine precincts and the well in which Michizane is rumored to have washed his hands. Wishes made while walking through the *kanō-mon* are said to come true, although each visitor is only allowed one wish per visit. Additionally, it is said that using the water from this well to write the traditional auspicious kanji character at the start of the New Year will improve the calligrapher’s penmanship.