

Masuda's Historic Merchant District

Masuda's historic merchant residences reflect the town's history as a booming mercantile hub and its location in one of Japan's snowiest regions. Many of the residences contain large interior storehouses called *uchigura*. Each of these storehouses is covered by a secondary roof (*saya*) that connects to the timbers of the main roof and extends almost across the entire property. Unlike the exterior storehouses of many merchant residences in Japan, Masuda's *uchigura* are used as living spaces and are lavishly decorated. Even today, many of the historic buildings are still used as private residences by families whose merchant lineages stretch back for generations.

Masuda was established in the 1300s as the townscape surrounding Masuda Castle, and the town continued to thrive even after the castle was demolished in the early 1600s. Masuda's history as an economic center begins with the creation of its morning market (*asaichi*) in 1643. Having been built at the junction of the Tegura and Oyasu Highways, the town flourished as a locus for the exchange and distribution of goods, and in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it became one of the largest producers of tobacco and silk in Akita Prefecture.

In 2013, the city of Yokote designated a 10.6-hectare section of Masuda a Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings to preserve the merchant residences that have stood there for centuries. The historic buildings that line the main street of town are characterized by gabled roofs that run perpendicular to the street, a design that is well suited to the snowy climate. In order to maintain their narrow storefronts, owners built their houses backward, away from the main street, creating the historic district's distinctive layout.