

## **The Castle Town of Yokote**

Yokote Park Observation Deck looks out toward Mt. Chōkai and over the city of Yokote. The observation deck was designed to resemble a castle keep, but it is a modern structure that dates to 1965. In contrast, the park occupies the centuries-old grounds of Yokote Castle, which stood until the mid-nineteenth century. The observation deck is located at the northern end of the park, in what was once the secondary bailey (*ninomaru*) of this hilltop castle. The *ninomaru* contained the residence of the castle keeper, or *jōdai*, whose job was to oversee the castle on behalf of the powerful Satake family. Although the residence and castle are now gone, the two families that once controlled them are largely responsible for establishing Yokote as it exists today.

### **Arrival of the Onodera Family and Establishment of the Castle**

The castle residence was initially occupied by the Onodera family, who built Yokote Castle. The Onodera family was awarded control of the area in the late twelfth century as repayment for service to the Kamakura shogunate (1185–1333). Afterward, they expanded their territory into the southern region of Akita Prefecture, building several castles in the area. Yokote Castle was fortified with steep earthen embankments sometime around 1550. To keep the embankments from collapsing, defenders planted *nira* (a vegetable similar to chives) to provide structure. This had the secondary benefits of making the embankments slippery and difficult for enemy attackers to climb, and the *nira* could be used as emergency foodstuffs if the castle came under siege.

The Onodera were accompanied by the families of their vassals, who occupied a neighborhood just below the hill. This led to a gradual expansion of the castle town as merchants and artisans moved to Yokote to meet the newly created demand for goods and services.

### **Control of Yokote Shifts to the Satake Family**

At the turn of the seventeenth century, Japan was embroiled in civil war. The Onodera family had taken the side of the eventual victors, the Tokugawa, but they made a critical error: as the Onodera armies returned from a campaign, they attempted to reclaim a neighboring territory that had been taken from them by another ally of the Tokugawa. This attack established the Onodera family as an enemy of the Tokugawa, and when the war ended, the Onodera were exiled to western Japan. Yokote castle and its surrounding territories, along with the rest of Akita domain, were given to the daimyo Satake

Yoshinobu (1570–1633) in 1602.

After the Satake established firm control of the area, they redirected the Yokote River to create space for more vassal homes. As a result, the lord's vassals were given land grants to build their residences near Yokote Castle, while the merchants built their homes and businesses on the opposite bank of the river.

Yokote Castle remained a part of Akita domain until its destruction during the Boshin War (1868), which brought an end to the Tokugawa shogunate. The remnants of the castle were used in the construction of Akita-jinja Shrine, which was built to enshrine the first and last of the Satake daimyo. In 1902, the area was turned into a park, and it continues to be the site of important local events such as the Winter Festival.