

The Townscape of Takayama

Historically, the mountainous land around Takayama was not well suited to farming rice. Because rice was used as the primary form of tax payment, the Hida region was given special permission to pay taxes in skilled labor instead. Beginning in the eighth century, artisans from Hida were put to work building wooden structures in Japan's early capital cities. Over the following centuries, the Hida region became known for its skilled carpenters and woodworkers.

By 1586, power in Hida had been consolidated under the leadership of Kanamori Nagachika (1524–1608), and the bustling town of Takayama developed around his castle. The town's location at the crossing of five major roads was good for Takayama's merchants, who grew wealthy under the governance of the Kanamori family.

In 1695, the Tokugawa shogunate placed Hida under its direct control. The Kanamori lords and their samurai retainers left the town, and Takayama became a city of merchants and artisans. As a result, Takayama's beautifully preserved old town consists almost entirely of *machiya*, houses where merchants and artisans lived and worked during the Edo period (1603–1867).

Fires were devastating in Takayama, where they spread quickly among the densely built wooden houses. Large parts of Takayama burned down and were rebuilt on five occasions between 1729 and 1832. Firefighter groups were formed in 1783, but their main firefighting tactic was to destroy the buildings surrounding a burning house. In order to protect their valuables, wealthy families built large storehouses with fire-resistant earthen walls.