

History of Takayama: The Castle-Town Era

The history of Takayama begins with the remote village of Yasugawa, in Hida Province. Located in mountainous central Honshu, Hida was isolated from the centers of political power. In 1550, the Mitsuki family was able to take control of the region. They ruled Hida from 1558 until 1585, when they were defeated by the forces of Kanamori Nagachika (1524–1608), head of the Kanamori family.

In 1588, Nagachika built Takayama Castle to secure his position as lord of Hida. During the next three decades, he participated in the struggle for control of the country and fought on the winning side of the Battle of Sekigahara (1600). When the victorious Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) established himself as shogun in 1603, Nagachika was allowed to keep Hida domain as a reward for his support.

The Kanamori family designed their castle town so that their samurai retainers lived close to the castle, along the Enako River, and merchants were forced to live farther from the castle, along the Miyagawa River. Hida merchants mostly supported themselves through mining, logging, and sericulture, but the region also supported many smaller industries.

In 1692, the sixth Kanamori lord, Yoritoki (1669–1736), was transferred to another domain. Over the next three years, Takayama Castle was dismantled, and the Tokugawa shogunate assumed direct control of Hida. The Kanamori retainers were all relocated, and their positions of power were taken over by bureaucrats from Edo (now Tokyo) and the merchants who stayed behind. Under the direct control of the government in Edo, the town grew into its golden age.