

Matsudaira-go and the Matsudaira Family

The village of Matsudaira (Matsudaira-go) in the mountains southeast of central Toyota is the ancestral home of the Matsudaira, one of the most influential samurai families in Japanese history. A Shinto shrine, Buddhist temple, two former hilltop strongholds, and a museum convey the origins of this family that first rose to local prominence and eventually came to rule all of Japan with the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867).

The Matsudaira lineage

According to local lore, the village of Matsudaira was founded in the late thirteenth century by nobleman Ariwara Nobumori, who moved there from Kyoto, which was the capital at the time. Nobumori's son Nobushige took over the estate from his father. One day, Nobushige received a visit from an itinerant monk named Tokuami (d. 1394?). The monk fell in love with Nobushige's daughter Suihime, married her, and thus became heir to the Ariwara household. Tokuami assumed the name Matsudaira Chikauji, thereby founding the Matsudaira family. His date of death is unconfirmed.

Chikauji placed the seven nearest villages under his control, and his successors expanded the family's domains even further, advancing across the plains to the south and west. By the mid-1500s, the Matsudaira controlled most of Mikawa Province (the eastern half of present-day Aichi Prefecture). Their base of power was Okazaki Castle, about 13 kilometers southwest of Matsudaira-go. This castle was the birthplace of Matsudaira Takechiyo (1543–1616), the ninth head of the Matsudaira family.

The expanding power of the Matsudaira was largely subdued by powerful rivals, but Takechiyo survived and cultivated a network of alliances that eventually made him one of the most formidable warlords of his time. He changed his name to Tokugawa Ieyasu, and following the decisive victory at the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, established the Tokugawa shogunate that was to rule Japan until 1867.

The Matsudaira name lived on within the Tokugawa family because only the heirs of each branch were called Tokugawa, while their siblings used the Matsudaira name. There were several other branch families of the Matsudaira as well, many of which were granted domains or important positions within the shogunate.

Matsudaira-go today

At the heart of present-day Matsudaira-go is Matsudaira Toshogu Shrine, where Tokugawa Ieyasu is enshrined as a Shinto deity. The shrine stands on the site of the former Matsudaira estate, a fortified compound at the foot of a steep mountainside that was protected by a moat on three sides. The estate remained home to a branch of the Matsudaira family well into the twentieth century. Further into the valley is Matsudaira-go Enchi Park, where a statue of Chikauji keeps watch over passersby. Beyond the park is Kogetsuin, the Matsudaira family temple.

Overlooking the road into Matsudaira-go is a hill where the Matsudaira were prepared to retreat in the event that the village should fall into enemy hands. Though known as Matsudaira Castle, this stronghold is thought to have consisted mainly of rudimentary fortifications around the top of the hill. Further west toward the mouth of the valley is the site where Ogyu Castle stood in the 1500s. The fragments of stone walls and ramparts visible there indicate that it was a much more “castle-like” fortification than was Matsudaira Castle.

Matsudaira Toshogu Shrine, Kogetsuin Temple, and the two castle sites together make up the Matsudaira National Historic Site.