

Historic Merchant Buildings: Fukunishi Honten and Suehiro Sake Brewery

The Aizu family surrendered to imperial forces at the end of the Boshin War (1868–1869). A new government was established under Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) and launched numerous reforms, one of which was dissolution of the samurai class. Many of the samurai turned to administrative jobs or started their own businesses in order to survive. As Japan moved into a new era, the people of Aizu began to rebuild the regional economy.

The city of Wakamatsu was established in 1889, becoming Aizu-Wakamatsu in 1951 when it was merged with seven surrounding villages. Merchants played a key role in the city's economic growth, and some businesses have histories of several hundred years. Two companies of historical importance, Fukunishi Honten and Suehiro Sake Brewery, offer an opportunity to learn about the post-Boshin War development and culture of Aizu-Wakamatsu during a visit to their well-preserved buildings.

Fukunishi Honten

Fukunishi Honten dates from 1914 and belonged to the wealthy and influential Fukunishi family, who ran a wholesaling business. Their former private living quarters are open to the public, offering glimpses of early twentieth-century architecture, furnishings, and accessories. The retail side of the business now operates as a souvenir shop and restaurant in the same building.

Of special note at the complex are the former storehouses coated with rare black plaster made by adding soot particles from burnt pinewood to the plaster. A high level of skill was required to maintain an even color and mirrorlike shine when coating the walls. Black plaster was considered to bring good fortune, and at a time when most merchants had white warehouses, its use was a sign of the Fukunishi family's wealth and status.

Suehiro Sake Brewery

This brewery was established in 1850 and has since been run by seven generations of the Suehiro family. Today, its prizewinning sake is exported around the world, and Suehiro is the official supplier for the revered Toshogu Shrine in Nikko.

The brewery welcomes visitors and offers guided tours in English upon request. Tours commence with a walk through the brewing areas and an explanation of the traditional *yamahai* (natural yeast and non-mashing) method, which utilizes a slow fermentation to

produce a full-bodied sake. There is a small museum with exhibits about the history of the company and sake making, and visitors can sample the brewery's products at the tasting bar inside the store. The brewery also has a café with a menu that includes sake-infused desserts. Another highlight of the brewery is a large private collection of film cameras, which can be viewed by visitors.