

Welcome to Omihachiman

Omihachiman is a small city on the southeastern shore of Lake Biwa, around 40 minutes by train from Kyoto. It was established as a castle town in the late sixteenth century and flourished as a commercial hub until the early twentieth century. The atmosphere of this prosperous period has been well preserved in the compact old town, where traditional merchants' residences and storehouses line the streets.

The historic district is located below Mt. Hachimanyama. The construction of a castle on the mountain's summit in 1585 sparked the town's development. The castle was abandoned within 10 years because of a dispute between its lord, Toyotomi Hidetsugu (1568–1595), and his uncle Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), then the most powerful warlord in Japan. The town of Omihachiman, however, continued to prosper, benefiting from the free-trade policies initiated by Hidetsugu as well as its advantageous location on Lake Biwa and near a major road between Kyoto and Edo (now Tokyo). The Hachimanbori Moat, built by Hidetsugu between Mt. Hachimanyama and the castle town to protect his castle and to connect the town with Lake Biwa, became a busy trade artery along which local merchants ferried their wares via the lake to major cities. These traders built up a nationwide reputation for their diligence, honesty, and social contributions.

In the early twentieth century, American architect and missionary William Merrell Vories (1880–1964), settled in the city and embraced the spirit of Omihachiman's merchants. He later designed several buildings now considered local landmarks. Vories is also fondly remembered for his public-spiritedness, having established a number of schools and medical care facilities in Omihachiman.

Historic Omihachiman stretches south from the foot of Mt. Hachimanyama, across the Hachimanbori Moat and into the merchant district along Nagaharacho and Shinmachi Streets. Just north of the moat is Himure Hachimangu Shrine, dedicated to Hachiman, the guardian deity of the warrior class and the origin of the town's name. The entire area is easy to tour on foot and part of it can be taken in on a leisurely boat ride on the Hachimanbori Moat. The summit of Mt. Hachimanyama can be reached by cable car from the station next to Himure Hachimangu Shrine, and William Merrell Vories's life and work can be explored in his former home, now known as Vories Memorial Hall.