

Warehouses in the Kitahama Area

Otaru was already an important port for sea freight and trade in the mid-nineteenth century, but its economy and population grew rapidly when Hokkaido's first railroad opened in 1882, bringing coal from inland mines to the port. Land reclamation efforts created additional areas along the coast to accommodate the needs of the expanding port. The Kitahama district was established on reclaimed land in 1889. Many warehouses were built in Kitahama, which had convenient access to the waterfront and railroads. A number of these warehouses were owned by merchant shipowners based in the Hokuriku region of Honshu which includes the prefectures of Ishikawa, Fukui, Niigata, and Toyama.

Six of the warehouses built by such merchant shipowners remain in the Kitahama area, near the north end of Otaru Canal. They are built from tuff stone from Otaru and Sapporo, fixed to a timber framework. The stone served as protection from fires, while the timber framework was quick and cheap to build.

1. Former Ukon Warehouse

The Ukon Warehouse was built in 1894 for merchant shipowners from Fukui Prefecture. It is a large gable-roofed warehouse. The Ukon family logo of two parallel black lines resembling chopsticks, is displayed on the front of the warehouse. The logo was also used on their store fronts and staff uniforms. The warehouse originally had a monitor roof. However, in 1924, dynamite being carried to a freight train exploded at Temiya Station, damaging nearby buildings, including the Ukon Warehouse. The roof was rebuilt, and the truncated shape of its roofline is a reminder of the incident.

2. Former Hiroumi Warehouse

The Hiroumi Warehouse is a large timber-framed stone warehouse built in 1889. The Hiroumi family were shipowners from Kaga in Ishikawa Prefecture, who established a warehouse business in Otaru in 1889. They traded in marine products and co-founded a marine insurance service with the Ukon family at the end of the nineteenth century. The warehouse has two large stone arched doorways for loading cargo.

3. Former Masuda Warehouse

The Masuda Warehouse was built in 1903. Like the Hiroumi family, the Masuda family were shipowners from Kaga. In the 1880s, they operated eight wooden *kitamaebune* merchant ships and three European-style sailing vessels. The warehouse is a two-story stone structure built on a wooden frame, with a gabled roof. Today, these Ukon, Hiroumi, and Masuda Warehouses are used for storage by the Kitaichi Glass Company, which operates a retail store and café in the Kimura Warehouse on Sakaimachi Street.

4. Former Oie Warehouse

The Oie Warehouse has decorative double-arched stonework over the two doors on its wide front and a monitor roof with windows. It was built in 1891 by the Oie family, shipowners from Kaga in Ishikawa Prefecture.

5. Former Shibusawa Warehouse

The Shibusawa Warehouse complex is a series of three connected stone buildings dating from 1895. A large stone structure with a gabled roof set back from the street connects two smaller buildings in front. The complex was built by the Endo family, but in 1915 it was purchased by industrialist Shibusawa Eiichi (1840–1931). Shibusawa is known as the “Father of Japanese Capitalism” for his work in developing modern businesses in Japan. The warehouse is currently open as a café.

6. Former Otaru Warehouse

The Otaru Warehouse complex was built in 1890 on newly reclaimed land by Nishitani Shohachi and Nishide Magozaemon, who were merchant shipowners from Kaga. The warehouses are built around a courtyard, where cargo was unloaded and processed. Several of the buildings now serve as the Otaru Museum.