

Takasago History Tour 2

Kuraku Matsuemon (1743–1812), a Takasago-born businessman and inventor, made significant contributions to Japan's shipping industry through his invention of what became known as Matsuemon canvas and to the development of Takasago as a port city, including the Mukojima Breakwater. He has been honored for his work with a statue at Takasago Shinto Shrine.

Mukojima and Kuraku Matsuemon

Takasago faces Harima Bay on the Seto Inland Sea. Most of the city is located on the alluvial plain on the west side of the Kakogawa River mouth, while the coastline is largely reclaimed land.

Takasago played an important role in the development of shipping routes and trade with cities on the Sea of Japan coast during the Edo period (1603–1867).

However, in the late Edo period, the port of Takasago was facing difficulties due to the accumulation of sediment flowing from Kako River, which made the waters shallow and a danger to navigation, hampering the local industries and communities that depended on the harbor's infrastructure.

Matsuemon was born to a fishing family by the name of Miyamoto. In 1758, he moved to the port of Hyogo-tsu (present-day Kobe) and became an apprentice with the shipping merchant Mikageya Heibei. Matsuemon started his own business around the age of 40, and adopted the name Mikageya. He shipped commodities such as rice, lumber, cotton, and seafood on a route that included Matsumae in Ezo (present-day Hokkaido), the Sea of Japan coast, the Seto Inland Sea, and Edo (present-day Tokyo).

As Matsuemon was very good at finding solutions to problems that ships encountered during their voyages or when docking at harbors to unload their cargos, he came to be recognized for his talent in engineering. In 1808 he was commissioned by the people of Takasago to fix the sediment problem at Takasago Port. His solution involved dredging the river and building a new wharf offshore for large ships, a project that took three years to complete. Matsuemon

also invented a sediment-dumping ship and a stone-pulling ship to accomplish the task of dredging sediment in the port and constructing the Mukojima Breakwater. In addition, he helped in the construction of a harbor on Etorofu (Iturup), an island north of Hokkaido, as well as the renovation of the harbor in Hakodate, Hokkaido.

Matsuemon is perhaps best known for developing Matsuemon canvas, a cotton material that was more durable, flexible, and long-lasting than any other used for sails at the time. He made cotton yarn by twisting together several strands of thread, which he then wove into cloth using a loom he devised for the purpose. The stronger sails made of this canvas enabled ships to travel faster and better withstand storms, making it safer to travel. As a result, transport capacity increased and Japan's maritime trade grew exponentially. Agronomist Okura Nagatsune (1766–1860) noted in his 1822 book on farming tools that Matsuemon canvas was used on every ship and boat in Japan.

Such were his achievements that the Edo shogunate bestowed on Matsuemon the surname Kuraku (meaning “enjoys ingenuity”).

Renovations of Takasago Harbor continued until the late nineteenth century. Matsuemon's descendants led projects to repair the quays and open up new farmland to the west of the harbor. This land was called Miyamoto (or Kuraku) Shinden (“new fields”). Today, it is part of the Takasago plant of the Kaneka Corporation, a chemical manufacturing company.

Tanpo Jinja Shrine

This shrine was established in 1864 in Minami-Zaimoku-cho, a part of Takasago, and was relocated to its current site in the early 1960s. Names are inscribed on the base of the shrine, along with notes on each individual's respective achievements. There is a 1929 addition commemorating the port's renovation.