

Takasago-cho and the *Kitamaebune*

In the middle of the Edo period (1603–1867), cargo ships began sailing from Osaka to Hokkaido on a route starting from the Seto Inland Sea, then going through the Kanmon Strait separating Honshu and Kyushu and up along the Sea of Japan coast to avoid the strong currents of the Pacific Ocean.

In the Meiji era (1868–1912), the number of *kitamaebune* (northbound ships) plying this route increased quite rapidly. They carried goods on both their outbound and return legs, unlike the vessels that transported daily necessities from the Kansai region to Edo (present-day Tokyo) along the Pacific coast. While the Edo-bound ships had empty holds on their return trips, which limited profits, the *kitamaebune* made multiple calls along the Sea of Japan coast, to maximize their income. The merchant sailors sold anything that would turn a profit and bought anything considered a bargain, which they would sell at the next stop.

Takasago played an important role in the development of *kitamaebune* shipping, thus advancing the growth of regional trade. Takasago's coastal location, facing Harima Bay on the Seto Inland Sea, made it a useful port of call. Many shipowners and merchant sailors built homes there due to the town's easy access to Osaka, the start of the *kitamaebune* route.

The invention of Matsuemon canvas by Takasago-born businessman and inventor Kuraku Matsuemon (1741–1812) had an enormous impact on the shipping industry of the time. As it was far more durable and flexible than the woven or light cotton grass sails in use up until then, Matsuemon canvas greatly improved the reliability and performance of sailing ships.

Due to the significant contributions Takasago has made to the development of Japan's domestic trade, many of its buildings are recognized as Japan Cultural Heritage Sites.