

Mutsurejima Island Lighthouse

This lighthouse stands on a small island at the western mouth of the Kanmon Strait. Mutsurejima Lighthouse was built in 1871 along with its twin at Hesaki, across the strait. It is one of the earliest stone-base lighthouses in Japan. Richard H. Brunton (1841–1901), known as “the father of Japanese lighthouses,” designed it while working for the Meiji government. Many such advisors, instructors, and engineers were invited from overseas to help modernize Japan during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The lighthouse, along with the still-standing stone reef marker (*shōhyō*) nearby, has guided scores of international trading ships through the Kanmon Strait. The lighthouse has helped keep the strait safe for decades, but it was born out of international conflict.

Toward the end of the Edo period (1603–1867), as the authority of the shogunal government was weakened by internal disputes, the imperial court in Kyoto began asserting itself in national affairs. In 1863, Emperor Kōmei (1831–1867) expressed his desire to see all foreign powers expelled from the country. Pro-imperial activists in the Chōshū domain (now part of Yamaguchi Prefecture) turned their cannons on US and European ships passing through the strait, and Western powers responded in force. The conflict ended in Shimonoseki in 1864, when a coalition of British, French, Dutch, and US forces shelled and invaded the city. In the aftermath, the victors demanded that Japan open more ports to foreign trade. Several lighthouses, including this one, were subsequently built to provide safe passage through the vital shipping lane.