

Arrival of *Kitamaebune*

Tsuchizaki thrived from the mid-1700s through the early 1900s as an important stop on the trade route between Osaka and Hokkaido. Collectively known as *kitamaebune* (northbound ships), the wooden merchant ships that traveled this route connected the towns and cities on the Sea of Japan, promoting the exchange of goods, culture, and information. The wealth generated by this trade made many Tsuchizaki merchants richer than members of the warrior class, their superiors in the social hierarchy.

Although the route was first navigated in the 1670s, *kitamaebune* trade began in earnest in the mid-1700s, when independent merchants began to charter their own ships to transport goods. The merchants did not simply carry cargo from Osaka to Hokkaido; they actively bought and sold goods at each port along the way. They used their knowledge and experience to take advantage of price differences along the route and mark up their goods accordingly. Their trading strategy proved to be extremely lucrative: One round trip could bring in profits as high as ¥100 million in today's currency.

One of the most sought-after items was the Pacific herring caught off the coast of Hokkaido. In addition to serving as a food source, herring could be fermented to create a rich fertilizer for farming. The fish was also used to

produce lamp oil, which was valuable in a time before electricity. These processed goods could be sold for five to ten times more than the cost of the fish.

Historical Sites Around the Port

Tsuchizaki is depicted as a bustling port in the *Akita kaidō emaki* (Scenes Along the Akita Road), an illustrated handscroll created between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Attributed to Ogitsu Katsutaka (1746–1809), the set of three scrolls offers a glimpse of life at the port over 200 years ago. Several of the structures depicted by Ogitsu remain a part of the landscape today.

One scene in the handscroll depicts a stone stupa on top of a hill overlooking the coast. This stupa is said to have been a landmark for sailors as they entered the port. Erected by a wealthy merchant in 1643, the original monument was destroyed by earthquakes in 1804 and 1810. A matching stupa that had been created the same year as the original was

moved to the site in 1967.

The handscroll also depicts the granite pagoda at Hōtōji Temple. The pagoda was built sometime between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, following an incident involving a merchant's ship that had been caught in a sudden storm on the approach to Tsuchizaki. It is said that the vessel was on the verge of becoming shipwrecked when a mysterious light suddenly appeared near the temple, guiding the crew safely to land. Believing that the guardian deity of the temple had provided this guiding light, the merchant donated the funds to build the pagoda in gratitude.

At the Tsuchizaki Minato Port Area Historical Museum, visitors can browse an interactive digital version of the handscroll to locate other sites that still dot the landscape today.