

Tracing the History of Shinagawa—a City that Shaped Modern Japan—and the Trajectory of Shinagawa Shirorenga



Utagawa Hiroshige, *Shinagawa: Sunrise (Shinagawa, Hinode)*, from the series *Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido Road*, Tokyo Fuji Art Museum

Shinagawa: From Post-Station Town to Modern Hub

Sustaining the Flow of People and Goods

In the southeast of Tokyo lies the Shinagawa area, a place that has been a vital hub of travel and transport since the Edo period (1603–1867)—a bustling crossroads where people and goods intersect. When the Tokugawa shogunate built the Tokaido—the main road connecting Edo (present-day Tokyo) with Kyoto—it established 53 post stations (*shukuba*) along the route to provide lodging for travelers. The one closest to Edo was Shinagawa. Serving as Edo's gateway and thriving as a seaside port town, Shinagawa was often depicted in *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints as a lively place where people, goods, and information converged from across Japan.

In 1872, Japan's first railway began service between Shimbashi and Yokohama, with Shinagawa Station opening as an intermediate stop. This reinforced Shinagawa's role as a distribution hub, and

its proximity to Tokyo Bay made it an important center for maritime transport. As one of the early centers of the Keihin industrial zone, Shinagawa attracted a wide range of manufacturers and evolved into an industrial district that helped drive Japan's modern industry.

The Shinagawa Shiorenga Works was established in Shinagawa in 1887. The story began when Katsuzo Nishimura, who had started Isekatsu Shiorenga Works in 1875 as Japan's first private fire-brick factory, moved the operation from Fukagawa—now Kiyosumi in Koto Ward—to Shinagawa. The company acquired the formerly government-run Shinagawa Glass Works in Kita-Shinagawa when it was privatized. With the relocation, the company changed its name to Shinagawa Shiorenga Works.

In 1903, the company was incorporated as Shinagawa Refractories Co., Ltd. (Shinagawa Shiorenga Kabushiki Kaisha in Japanese). After more than a century, in 2009, it merged with JFE Refractories Corporation to form a new Shinagawa Refractories Co., Ltd.; its Japanese name became Shinagawa Refractories Kabushiki Kaisha.* For about 100 years, the company continued to produce high-quality fire bricks—the kind used in steel plants and a wide range of industrial furnaces. These fire bricks became widely recognized as one of the industrial products that symbolize Japan's modernization.

*In October 2025, the company name Shinagawa Refractories Co., Ltd. was changed again to Shinagawa Refra Co., Ltd.

How Shinagawa Shiorenga Began—with Fire Bricks

During the Meiji era (1868–1912), as Japan rapidly modernized to stand alongside Western powers, a small factory founded by Katsuzo Nishimura set out to produce domestically made fire bricks for gas generators, which powered the gas lamps that came to symbolize the new era of civilization and enlightenment. Despite difficulties raising funds and early managerial struggles, Nishimura and a team of skilled engineers worked on technology development and located high-quality raw material sites. They eventually succeeded in producing fire bricks that rivaled imported ones.



A brick bearing the inscription “Shinagawa”

In 1908, the company expanded into the production of bricks for building construction. When Tokyo Station opened in 1914, the company supplied all the facing bricks used for the station’s exterior design, gaining recognition for the bricks’ reliable quality and graceful beauty. The red bricks commonly associated with Tokyo Station can still be seen today on the station’s first- and second-story outer walls.



Today’s Marunouchi station building at Tokyo Station

Shinagawa's Development and Shinagawa Shirorenga's Trajectory: A Timeline

1872 • Japan's first railway opens between Shimbashi and Yokohama.
(Meiji 5)

1875 • Katsuzo Nishimura starts Japan's first private fire-brick factory in Shibaura.

1884 • After acquiring the government-run fire-brick factory in Fukagawa, the company merges it with the Shibaura factory and starts operations under the name Isekatsu Shirorenga Works.

1887 • The factory moves from Fukagawa to Kita-Shinagawa and is renamed Shinagawa Shirorenga Works.

1903 • Shinagawa Refractories Co., Ltd.
(Shinagawa Shirorenga Kabushiki Kaisha in Japanese) is established.

1914 • When Tokyo Station opens, the company supplies all the facing bricks for the station's exterior.
(Taisho 3)

1927 • The Shinagawa head-office factory closes, ending roughly 40 years of operation at that site.

2009 • Shinagawa Refractories Co., Ltd. merges with JFE Refractories Corporation to form a new Shinagawa Refractories Co., Ltd.; its Japanese name becomes Shinagawa Refractories Kabushiki Kaisha.
(Heisei 21)

2025 • Celebrating its 150th anniversary, the company changes its name to Shinagawa Refra Co., Ltd.

