

The History of Seibu in Photos (Part 1)

I The Early Days of Seibu Railway (1892–1969)

Part 2

A Story That Began in Kawagoe, Popularly Known as Koedo (Little Edo)

The first Seibu Railway route to begin operation was the Kawagoe Railway, a 29.3 km section between Kokubunji and Kawagoe (currently Hon-Kawagoe). This section comprised what is today the Kokubunji Line and a portion of the Shinjuku Line network. Let us consider the *raison d'être* of Kawagoe Railway and the history of its development, including the reason for building a track starting from Kawagoe.

In the 15th century, warlord Ota Dokan built a castle in Kawagoe, which developed as a castle town. A shipping route between Edo (present-day Tokyo) and Kawagoe was established on the Shingashigawa River, which flows alongside the Arakawa River. Thus Kawagoe prospered as a shipping hub where goods produced in, or for delivery to the western Musashino region were collected. In the late 19th century, Kawagoe was the largest city in Saitama Prefecture, and popularly known as Koedo (Little Edo) because of its warehouse district. Many of these historical buildings remain today and a Seibu Railway limited express train has been named Koedo.

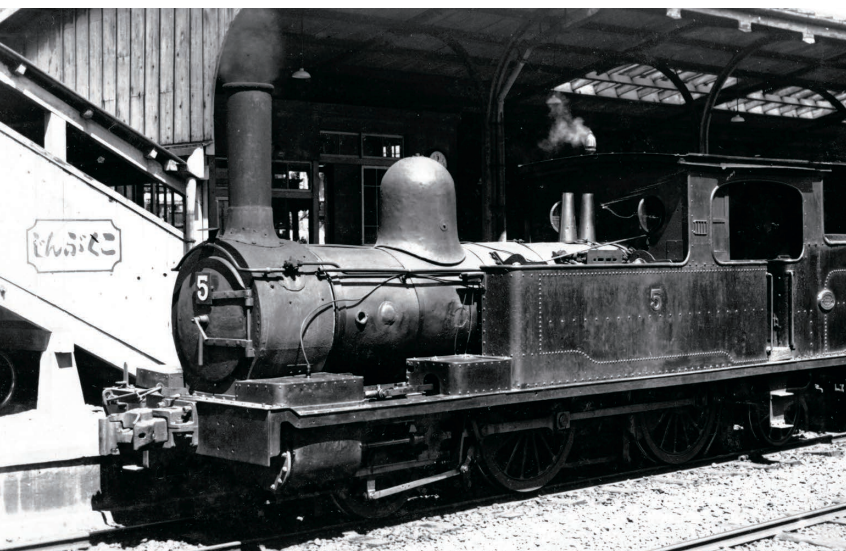
Nippon Railway (currently the Takasaki Line) was the first railway to open in northern Kanto in 1883, and Kobu Railway (currently the Chuo Main Line) opened in 1889. The Musashino Plain, which occupies the area between these two lines, was renowned for its silk thread, textiles, and tea. It is no surprise that a rail route between Kawagoe (a major provincial city) and Tokyo was planned in the heyday of the railways.

Significance of railway construction in Kawagoe, which prospered as a shipping hub in the Edo Period

The ideal solution was a direct route between Kawagoe and Tokyo, but that meant a long track that would require massive capital investment. Two options were considered. The first was a route connecting to Nippon Railway's Omiya Station, but this required the construction of a substantial rail bridge over the Arakawa River. Kawagoe Railway took the other option, which was a route heading south from Kawagoe via Iruma and Tokorozawa and connecting to Kobu Railway's Kokubunji Station.

The list of promoters makes for interesting reading. Of the 39 promoters, almost all except five wealthy men and financiers living in Tokyo were residents of Iruma or Komagun, and not one of them was a resident of Kawagoe. The citizens of Iruma appear to have been keen on building a railway, because it was a tea and silkworm-producing region with no access to shipping services such as in Kawagoe.

Some believe that the people of Kawagoe felt that the status of the city as a shipping hub was threatened by the railway, which would transport goods directly to Tokyo without going through Kawagoe. The city's authorities even published a newspaper advertisement stating that it did not wish to create the false impression that it was involved in Kawagoe Railway. However, it was obvious that the age of railways had arrived. Some Kawagoe citizens donated land for a rail depot, which led to a station being built near the



The left-hand photo shows the No. 5 locomotive of the former Seibu Railway (originally Kawagoe Railway) stopped at Kokubunji Station. The top photo shows Tokorozawa Station in the Taisho Era. The platform with a large tree on the right of the photo has Kawagoe Railway on the left and Musashino Railway on the right.

city center. The Kokubunji–Kumegawa section (a provisional name) opened in 1894 and the Kokubunji–Kawagoe route in the following year.

After railway opens, a variety of opportunities explored with the goal of direct service to Tokyo

From the time of its founding, Kawagoe Railway was under the strong influence of Kōbu Railway, as were its operations. Sales were outsourced to Kōbu Railway. All services terminated at Kōbu Railway's Iidamachi Station (near today's Iidabashi Station) and all trains were operated jointly. Thus Kawagoe Railway was essentially a branch line of Kōbu Railway. When the route first opened, there were six round trips per day, with the trip from Iidamachi to Kokubunji taking about an hour, and the section from Kokubunji to Kawagoe about the same length of time.

While it is no surprise that journey times were longer than they are today, traveling from Kawagoe to central Tokyo via Kokubunji was clearly a major detour, and it was evident that a direct rail route from Kawagoe to Tokyo would put Kawagoe Railway in jeopardy. This scenario soon became reality. The Tojo Railway from Sugamomachi (currently Sugamo, Toshima Ward, Tokyo) to Shibukawamachi (currently Shibukawa) via Kawagomachi, Matsuyamamachi (currently Higashi-Matsuyama) and Takasaki was planned. Influential citizens of Hanno also submitted a plan for Musashino Railway. If these railways were built, they would dramatically reduce travel times to Tokyo from Kawagoe and Tokorozawa.

Kawagoe Railway explored ways to shorten the travel time to Tokyo to compete with the new lines. The company applied for a license in 1912 to split the line at Higashi-Murayama and run a branch line to Nakano Station on the Chuo Main Line (the nationalized Kōbu Railway), but was turned down on the grounds that it was not necessary. The company acquired a license to run a service from Hakonegasaki (in Mizuho-machi, Tokyo) to Kichijōji via Higashi-Murayama from Murayama Light Railway in 1916. The company decided on Kichijōji as a destination instead of Nakano, but could not begin construction for many years.

Current Shinjuku Line born along a winding path of mergers and acquisitions and the takeover of other lines

In 1905, Japan's first high-speed electric railroad started running in Kansai, featuring acceleration and deceleration performance superior to steam trains. Electrification became indispensable to survival, as having frequent stations along the line boosted sales. Unlike today, at that time there were various small and medium-sized electric utilities. Many railways were also involved in power transmission, and the



Kawagoe Electric Railway started operations in 1906 on the Kawagoe-Kubomachi–Omiya section (top photo). It was closed in 1941 with the launch of the JNR Kawagoe Line. The bottom photo shows Seibu Kido (Shinjuku Line in the former Seibu Railway era), which operated on the Ogikubo–Shinjuku section. This was subsequently transferred to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, becoming the Toden Suginami Line.

reverse was often true of the electric power companies.

Ultimately, in 1920 Kawagoe Railway was taken over by Musashi Hydroelectric, which had already brought Kawagoe Electric Railway under its ownership. Musashi Hydroelectric was on an aggressive expansion path and in the following year, 1921, it took over Seibu Kido, which was operating on the Shinjuku–Ogikubo section. Seibu Kido had a concession to lay track between Ogikubo and Tanashi, and linking up with Kawagoe Railway's concession would make a direct connection between Higashi-Murayama and Shinjuku possible. This was the aim of the merger by takeover.

However, the company was caught in the wave of electric utility consolidation, and Musashi Hydroelectric was taken over by Teikoku Electric. That company had no intention of operating railroads or tracks, and in 1922 it spun the railroad off as an independent entity. This became the former Seibu Railway.

The former Seibu Railway came into being after numerous twists and turns. There was a patchwork of railroad and track concessions, and furthermore with routes that were by no means the shortest, the company could not compete against Musashino Railway, which was already operating and carrying many passengers. The former Seibu Railway added a new section to Takadanobaba to its one from Higashi-Murayama to Tanashi, and applied for a license for the Murayama Line. The historic roots of the current Shinjuku Line are here.

I
The Early Days of
Seibu Railway

II
Initial Period of Seibu Group
Real Estate Development

III
Business Expansion and
Renewal Period

IV
The Rebuilding Period