

Karn Organ and Piano Company

J. M. Miller and Dennis W. Karn formed a partnership to manufacture musical instruments in 1870, known as Miller and Karn. Karn was an amateur musician, teacher and instrument maker that was making melodeons at his small north Oxford Farm. Miller was a craftsmen making reed organ for the Woodstock elite.

This partnership was dissolved by 1873 when Karn picked up two new partners James Alexander Gunn and Samuel Staebler. By 1875 Karn had dissolved that partnership as well and changed the name to D.W. Karn & Company. Karn was set up in a small clapboard shop on Dundas Street and before long had nine craftsmen working for him. With a rapidly growing Woodstock, demand was increased and Karn need to expand. The first factory was located on the southwest corner of Dundas and Reeve Street. The factory was moved to the south side of Dundas Street, just west of Wellington Street but was destroyed by fire in 1879. The factory was rebuilt on the same site but this too was destroyed by fire in 1886. Karn then acquired the old Woodstock Hotel, a four-story white brick building at the corner of Dundas and Wilson. A large addition was put onto the building to accommodate the organ works. A large piece of land was also acquired immediately across the street for the piano branch of the factory. This company began to make pianos after 1886 and the first Karn player piano was built in 1901.

Karn, now a prominent citizen, ran for and became mayor of Woodstock from 1889 – 1890. He survivor of the infamous St. George Railway Disaster of 1889 and later ran for the provincial legislature twice, but lost both times.

In 1896 with the company still expanding, Karn bought S.R. Warren and Son Organ Company of Toronto and began to build Karn-Warren pipe organs. In 1909 Dennis Karn retired and the company amalgamated with the Morris Piano Makers of Listowel to form Karn-Morris Piano and Organ Co. Ltd., with E.C. Thornton as general manager. In 1920 the Karn Morris partnership was dissolved and Cecilian Piano Company and Sterling Action Key Ltd, from Toronto, bought the company. In 1924, what was left of the company was purchase by Sherlock-Manning and continued to make organ under the name of Karn until 1961. Over 75 styles of the world famous Karn Organ were made in Woodstock over the run of the business.