

Mary Arenz Merchant (1841 – 1921)

Mary Arenz Merchant was born on February 28, 1841, in New Berlin, Illinois, the fourth of ten children. Her parents were Francis and Louisa Arenz from Arenzville, Illinois. Her father, Francis, was originally from Blankenberg, Prussia (now Germany), and moved to the United States in 1827. He worked in Kentucky before moving to Galena, Illinois, where he worked in the lead trade. Later, he became a naturalized citizen and moved to Beardstown, Illinois, where he got involved in business and real estate. In 1839, he bought land near Morgan County, and in 1852, the town that grew up there was named Arenzville in his honor.

Mary studied at the Methodist Female College in Jacksonville, Illinois, now called MacMurray College. On February 14, 1860, she married Ira Merchant, a businessman's son from Cass County. They had a daughter named Ella. Ira was born in New Jersey, grew up on a farm, and worked as the first city engineer of Bloomington, Illinois, for 13 years. He helped improve the city by repaving streets, building sewers, and setting up a water system.

The Merchants lived in Bloomington for 35 years, where Mary became an active member of the Second Presbyterian Church. In 1867, Mary was appointed superintendent of the first temporary home for orphaned children of soldiers, later called the Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's School. The home was in Normal, Illinois, and had been created to care for the children of United States Civil War veterans. A local group, led by businessman Jesse Fell, raised money to build the home in Normal, which won a bid for the location.

Mary began overseeing the home in August 1867, caring for 54 children in a small house. By 1869, the permanent home was ready, and Mary made sure the children were well cared for, even during illnesses like measles and scarlet fever. She worked tirelessly, managing supplies, keeping records, and making sure the children's needs were met. She was offered the position of superintendent of the new home but declined due to concerns about her daughter's health.

On November 27, 1902, Ira died suddenly after a violent coughing fit, likely caused by a stroke. After his death, Mary moved to California to live with her daughter, Ella. Mary passed away on April 5, 1921, in Los Angeles and was buried in Bloomington's Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.