



## *Slavery / Abolitionism in Ednah Dow Cheney (1824-1904)*

Therese Boos Dykeman

Ednah Dow Cheney based her opposition to slavery on her foundational theory of human nature. Her Transcendental philosophy influenced by her Unitarian beliefs argued that all human nature is divinely inspirited—soul or spirit, mind, and body or matter. So, fundamentally, as one human being to another, equal in their humanity, neither sex nor race should be live or be treated unequally. Benevolent human action being “a precept of humanity,” Cheney determined first the philosophical basis for taking action, and then she took action. Cheney wrote compositions on anti-slavery in grade school, taught members of the Black regiment preparing to enter the Civil War, and read aloud the diminished roll call when they returned. When slavery was abolished, she encouraged education in the Freedmen schools in the South, visiting them and writing reports, and later, encouraged the medical profession to train and hire “colored women” for their qualities of “patience, sweetness, and affection.” No matter the topic, Cheney related it to slavery and abolition. The most important topic was education: To be free means to be free to inquire. The soul and mind, deprived of education cannot gain earthly fulfillment of their nature. Following African-American advance in education over many years, she was dismayed to find in their churches in the South the preaching of anti education with an imbalance of emotion over thought. She believed that nature requires balancing thought with feeling. Friend of Harriet Tubman and Harriet Jacobs, Cheney’s lectures often quoting them and Frederick Douglass. In other words, in every way Cheney put her philosophy of human equality and belief that “each day to Good (or Love) be given” into action to ameliorate the great injustice of slavery and its aftermath. She contemplated in 1868, the “dead weight of slavery lifted,” on to the “march of humanity!”

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