Before Confederation in Canada, many citizens of European descent, bought, sold, and owned slaves. While under the ownership of their masters, African slaves were expected to be quiet and subservient; to do what was demanded of them. If not, punishments could vary from imprisonment to branding, and in many cases, death. Many of those that were enslaved during the 18th and 19th centuries could no longer put up with the inhumane treatment they had experienced. By resisting the dehumanization and cruelty slaves were exposed to at the hands of their masters, African slaves in Canada were able to play a pivotal role in ending slavery.

Many slaves would resort to drastic measures to have their voices heard. “Arson, armed rebellions, and homicide” (Cooper, 6), were only a few of the methods used to shed light on the matter at hand. Other methods, as demonstrated by Peter Martin, a Revolutionary War veteran and emancipated Black man, led to legal reform quicker than those mentioned previously. Martin had witnessed the sale of Chloe Cooley, from her Canadian owner to an American owner in March of 1793. Cooley had been tied up and hauled away, despite her desperate pleas. When Martin reported what he saw, he believed it to be beneficial to brig along a white witness, William Grisley, to testify to what he and Martin had seen. Although no one was prosecuted for what had occurred, Peter Martins actions lead to a law called, “An Act to Prevent the Further Introduction of Slaves and to Limit the Terms of Contract for Servitude Within this Province” (Cooper, 12).

Peter Martin wasn’t the only African doing everything in his power to abolish slavery. Peggy, a Black woman from 101, rebelled against her owners by demonstrating, “insolent, pilfering, lying behaviour,” (Peggy Difficult Property). In doing so, she aggravated her owners, making it difficult for them to own her without despising her. Much like Peggy, Henry Lewis also made life difficult for his previous owner. After escaping Upper Canada to New York, he wrote to him, requesting to buy his freedom. Doing so had angered the wife of his owner, evoking exactly the reaction he had hoped for.

Overall, the methods used to begin the slow process of abolition in Pre-Confederation Canada were brazen. However, they were the catalysts required to begin changing the way slaves were purchased, and eventually, how they were freed.