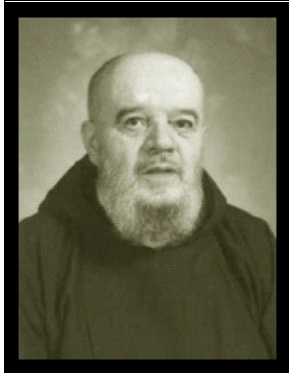


# Neerology

**John Freienstein**  
**1924-1998**



John Freienstein was born in Mishawaka, Indiana, the second of four children and the only son of John Peter Freienstein and Agnes Code on 25 July 1924. His mother had been a school teacher, and by the time her children entered Catholic grade school they could read and write, add and subtract. John learned quickly and he was bored by the repetition which the slower students required. He got "A"s in all subjects except English. Because his parents could not afford the tuition at the local Catholic high school, John attended John Adams Senior High School in South Bend, Indiana, where he took a course of studies to prepare him to be a machinist. Sports were his main interest in high school; nonetheless he maintained a "B" average. Football, ice skating and golf were his passion. During high school he also developed his life-long interest in stamp collecting.

John described his family life during his childhood as close. He and his father spent quite a bit of time together. Whatever jobs his father had to do around the house he always took time to talk to John about them and to explain just what he was doing.

After graduation from high school John got a position as an apprentice machinist at the South Bend Lathe Works, where he worked for about five months, until he joined the Navy in October 1942. After boot camp John went to school for six months as an aviation machinist mate. He then trained for two months as an aerial gunner. He served for nineteen months in the Central Pacific mostly with the Second Marine Division, working on the flight support aircraft. He returned to the United states to attend flight school as an enlisted pilot. He was sent to Cornell College in Mt. Vernon, Iowa for four months for special courses in math and physics, and then to pre-flight school in Iowa City. When the war ended in August, the program was dropped and John returned to the fleet to complete the last three of his six year enlistment.

It was after the war, while he was still in the Navy, that the thought of a religious vocation first entered his mind. When John was discharged in October 1948 he had still not made up his mind what to do. He took a job in production control at the United States Rubber Company. After three months he quit and took a job at the Studebaker plant as a machine repairman. He remained there until April 1950. He applied for admission to the Poor Brothers of Saint Francis in Cincinnati. He was scheduled to report to the monastery in August. In June the Korean War began and since John was in the Air Force Reserves, he was called up the day after the war began. He received a couple of postponements, but he finally reported to active duty in November. He served

until November of the following year, but his term of enlistment was extended in the Reserves until 1953, effectively ruling out his entry into religious life for two years.

John took a job with the Bendix Corporation in the Cost Control Department. During this time he joined the Legion of Mary in his parish and spent almost all his spare time working with the group. In 1956 he made up his mind to enter a religious community to find out for sure whether or not he really had a vocation. If his entry into religious life had been gradual and even delayed in its unfolding, his eventual choice of what order to enter was too hasty. In just two weeks' time he was a member of the Discalced Carmelites, but the inactivity of their life was not for John. He left with the intention of joining a more active order.

Again John was delayed in pursuing his religious vocation. He had an emergency appendectomy which was followed by complications from which he recovered only after two months. This left him with debts, so he had to get a job to pay them off. He worked in the payroll department of the Utica-Bend Corporation until the spring of 1957 when the company went out of business. After about three months' unemployment he went to work at the Edwards Iron Works until they went out of business nine months later!

The recession in the late 1950s made finding a job difficult, so John joined the Air Force, where he remained until 1963. John distinguished himself in the Air Force, receiving a commendation as outstanding airman, and for having acted swiftly and efficiently to extinguish a fire which broke out in a missile area. Most of his time was spent going to schools of various kinds in order to learn the skills needed in order to work with the Atlas missile program. In December 1963 he was honorably discharged from the Air Force and took a very good paying job with an engineering firm, where he worked until a fateful day when he went to Huntington, Indiana for the funeral of his aunt. He took a walk, as he had as a child with his father when the family visited Huntington, out past Saint Felix Friary. John knew that he was not enjoying the "good life" which he was living, and that day he thought of joining the Capuchins. Six weeks later, in July 1969, after much prayer and thought, he returned to Saint Felix and spoke with Ray Meier about Capuchin life. He made application and began a candidacy at Marathon. In August 1970 John was invested in the Capuchin habit at Saint Felix Friary in Huntington, Indiana. He was a 46 year old novice; most of his novitiate classmates were in their late teens or early twenties; his newly appointed novice master was 31 years old!

Everyone in the novitiate was concerned about "the old man." The novitiate team offered him a much greater chance to associate with the professed friars than was the norm at the time. The novices consulted the novice master at times as to whether or not to include John in some activity, such as a game of touch football. The advice was always, "Invite him; but he may not want to participate." The morning after the first touch football game found John in the choir earlier than anyone else, as was his custom. He sat, as always, with his arms folded and his eyes closed. However, later he revealed that he enjoyed immensely watching the "youngsters" come into morning prayer that day after the football game and make their prostration with great difficulty because of

their aching muscles. The rest of the novices conceded that "He outran, out-kicked, out-passed and out-blocked all of us!"

John was physically strong. In banter one day his young novitiate classmate, Larry Kaiser, threatened to take John on in a fight. John thrust out his abdomen, spread his arms and said, "Ok. You get the first punch, but it better be a good one, because it will be the last one you get."

If there was question in the minds of the novitiate team whether John could be at home in his novitiate, there was no such doubt in John's mind. He became a part of the community, which he served as something of a bookkeeper. After his investiture he immediately began growing a beard. He was invited to meet with the provincial finance committee about a month later. He asked what he should do about his then straggly beginnings of a beard; should he shave before he went to the meeting. He was not concerned about making a negative impression on the other members of the committee, but he wondered about the propriety of showing up unshaven.

John was a voracious reader. During his novitiate he spent a great deal of his leisure time reading the "fathers" of the church. Throughout his life he continued to read. He seems to have preferred biographies and historical novels. In later life the reading of novels provided a link with his sister, Mary, who began reading Peter Danielson's *Children of the Lion* series which included more than cameo appearances of the biblical characters from Cain to David. After she finished with the volumes she would send them to John as Christmas or birthday gifts. During the last two years of his life John began receiving from Mary the Brother Cadfael novels. He recommended to others the books he particularly liked. After profession of first vows John was transferred to Saint Mary's Seminary in Crown Point where he took some classes and participated in the formation program. At the end of that school year he was transferred back to Saint Felix Friary in Huntington where he worked in maintenance and assisted Cyril Langheim in the business office.

During the five years he spent at Saint Felix, he developed a friendship with Keith Clark, who had been his novice director. They vacationed together each summer, golfing their way around Lake Michigan. John taught Keith how to golf . . . sort of. To the end of his life John would rehearse with Keith some favorite stories from their vacations together. Their personal vacation schedules were very different from one another. John went to bed early; Keith stayed up and read or watched TV. John rose early in the morning and read while Keith slept late. But each day was judged successful if it included a "store-bought" breakfast at a local café or diner, 18 holes of golf, and dinner at a restaurant in the evening. Friends often provided cottages at which they stayed; other nights they stayed at Capuchin friaries. On occasion they had to resort to staying in a motel.

It became their custom to end their vacations with dinner at the Boar's Head Inn in South Bend before they returned to Huntington. One year the last day of their vacation relegated them to a par three golf course. After the game they went to the Boar's Head,

but they were too early. So they went to the Howard Johnson's cocktail lounge next door and sat down at the bar. The bartender came over and asked, "What'll you have?" "Old Granddad and seven," John said, and the bartender walked down the bar and prepared the drink. "And what'll you have?" he asked Keith. "A brandy manhattan on the rocks," Keith said. The bartender said something which neither John nor Keith could hear. "Pardon me," Keith said. "I'll have to see some identification," the bartender said loudly. Keith reached across the bar, grasped the man's hand and said, "Sir, today is the last day of my vacation; I have just shot the best game of golf in my life. But it is you, sir, who have made my day!" Keith whipped out his wallet and threw it on the bar. The bartender looked at the driver's license and said, "1939! I've never been that far off." Of course Keith enjoyed the experience. So did John. To the end of his life he would occasionally recall the event and say, "Remember the look on his face when he saw that you were born in 1939?"

In Marquette, Michigan John and Keith walked into a downtown café for their store-bought breakfast. John ordered bacon and eggs and white toast dry, no butter. The waitress brought the plates to the table and the toast was buttered. "I don't want any butter," John reminded her. She took the toast away and put two more slices of bread into the toaster. When they popped up, out of habit she grabbed the brush from the pot of half melted butter and passed it over the two pieces of toast and returned to the table with them. "I said, 'No butter!'" John bellowed. The expression on his face and the tone of his voice suggested a pedantry and harshness which was simply not a part of John. Perhaps he experienced a throw-back to his grade school days and the annoying repetition which was required for his classmates to catch on. To his dying day he laughed about the incident in the café in Marquette.

On their annual golfing trips around Lake Michigan John took pleasure in pointing out to Keith the parts of I-94 for which he was one of the field engineers. One year while traveling west on I-94 near Benton Harbor, John suddenly told Keith to turn off at the next exit. As they drove up the off-ramp, John asked, "Find anything unusual about this ramp?" Keith didn't. "It's sloped a little too steep, isn't it?" John asked. "Well, I suppose so," Keith said. John laughed and told a story of one engineering firm directing the construction coming out of Chicago, and John's firm directing the westward progress of the highway construction. "We didn't meet up just right," John said. "So this ramp is too steep."

Another time while passing the steel mills in Gary, Indiana, John told the story of being at the top of a blast furnace in a driving winter rain storm as he supervised some part of the construction of the blast furnace.

Vacations always included a stop in South Bend and Mishawaka, Indiana to visit with John's sisters and their families. His oldest nieces were in high school at the time. The youngest ones were little children. They seemed to delight in the visit from "Uncle Brother John."

In 1974 John made his solemn profession and stayed on at Saint Felix. Among his other duties he sort of supervised some of the outdoor work of the novices. He almost always worked along with them. One afternoon he was standing on the back of a wagon behind the parked tractor. Suddenly he convulsed and fell backward onto the ground. The ambulance took him to the hospital. Everyone, including the nurses at the hospital, thought he had had a heart attack. But Doctor Matthew did not have him in the cardiac care unit. The nurses spoke to Keith, the local minister at the time, and told him they were concerned that John was not in cardiac care. The telltale enzymes in his blood indicated a massive heart attack. Keith spoke with Doctor Matthew about the nurses' concern. "I don't yet know what happened to him," Doctor Matthew said, "but if that is a heart attack, it is the biggest one anybody ever saw!" The doctor explained that the enzyme count in John's blood was ten times what would be produced by a heart attack. In later life John would sometimes quote Doctor Matthew, always with a mischievous smile on his face.

That incident of his first seizure began a period of more than twenty years of tests, doubts, medical treatment for a variety of possible ailments, surgeries, and gradual decline in his activities.

In July 1977 he was transferred to Saint Lawrence Friary in Mount Calvary, where he remained for the rest of his life. He served in the business office, worked on the maintenance crew, especially in the summer time when he cut grass and pulled the grass and weeds out from the cracks in the sidewalk, until a surgery on his hand left him unable to dig out the weeds. Carl Schaefer recalls the day on which John presented him with his pruning shears and announced that he could no longer manage to manicure the lawns in the courtyard.

John was also enlisted to supervise the younger students in study hall and eventually to take over the supervision of the student dining room. He growled at recalcitrant students, but his gruffness of voice and appearance didn't put the students off. In fact, he was not a disciplinarian in any sense.

In 1985 Keith again entered John's life. The following year Keith was appointed president of Saint Lawrence Seminary. Joe Diermeier was appointed rector, and he ran the school. One day Keith left his office to go to the student dining room to ask John to tone down the pages he made over the public address system. It was customary for John to say in the loudest and gruffest possible voice something like, "Joe Blow, report to your work crew . . . NOW!" and slam down the receiver of the phone in the dining room. "I was going over to ask him not to be so gruff," Keith said. "I wondered what visitors to the campus would think if they heard what sounded like an angry, dictatorial voice paging the students. I walked into the dining room, and witnessed John working along side of the students who were mopping the floor. The obvious camaraderie between John and the students halted me. I decided that if John were to be more gentle in his announcements, the students would wonder what went wrong. I decided that I'd just explain to any concerned visitors that John was understood by the students, and he understood them."

Throughout his life John continued to visit his sisters twice a year, at Christmas time and during the summer. At Christmas he would fly from Oshkosh or Appleton into South Bend. During the summer Ron Jansch would drive him to the Notre Dame Oasis on the Indiana toll road where John's sister, Mary, would meet them. Ron remembers John as a great conversationalist during those drives to South Bend. John returned to Saint Lawrence by taking the South Shore train to Chicago, where he caught a bus for Milwaukee and then to Fond du Lac. John was proud of the academic and athletic and career successes of his nieces and nephews. "Remember little Margaret?" he would ask. "Well, she's not little any more!"

Gradually declining health took from him his golfing, his driving, his ability to work with his hands, and at the end, his ability to walk. John had heart by-pass surgery in 1983, surgery on his hand in 1990, surgery to repair or remove an abdominal aneurysm in 1997, and heart surgery in 1998. A stroke on 1 December 1998 sent John to Saint Agnes Hospital, from which he was released a week later, when he entered a rehabilitation program at All About Life Rehabilitation Center in Fond du Lac. Five days later he died due to liver failure.

Poor health did not take from him an optimistic and tolerant spirit and a genuine delight in being a Capuchin. Right up to the day he was taken to the hospital for the last time, he greeted his brothers and other people in the friary with a loud and cheery, "Howdy!"

Throughout the years of his physical decline John's spirit grew. His personal prayer alone in his room was augmented by his fidelity to community eucharist and office. Within hours of returning from the hospital after surgery he would be in chapel for evening prayer. "He hung in there even when he dozed and fell asleep and the breviary dropped from his hand," Ronald Jansch remembers. "He was a religious brother," Kathy Andrew, the nurse at Saint Lawrence Friary, emphasized. "He didn't wear his religion on his sleeve, but he was very religious." Hers is testimony to the accomplishment of John's intentions in joining the order. In his autobiography, which he had to submit as part of the application process, John wrote, "I believe that the religious life will be an aid to me in drawing closer to God and maybe in some small way I could be of service to others in their attempts to learn more about God and to serve him."

John died on 11 December

*Written by Keith Clark with contributions from Mary Freienstein, Ronald Jansch and Kathy Andrew*