

## Virgil Hillyer's Vision: Alive in the Calvert School Curriculum

Just after the turn of the twentieth century, Virgil M. Hillyer, a Harvard graduate and Head Master of Calvert School, suggested to a bookstore operator in downtown Baltimore that the private school curriculum could be sold to families so more children could obtain a Calvert School education. Thus started the first curriculum for homeschool families.

The first year, 1906, there were six families. But by 1910, there were 205 families. Then, 1,000 families were using the distinctive Calvert School curriculum by 1920. The Calvert School's curriculum is now sold annually to more than 17,000 families with children enrolled in Pre-Kindergarten through Eighth Grade. What these families receive in their Calvert School "classroom in a box" continues to build upon the ideas and teachings of Virgil Hillyer.

Mr. Hillyer believed in a strong foundation in the fundamentals of writing, spelling, reading, and mathematics. Building upon that base, Mr. Hillyer believed students should be taught art, geography, music, science, and history. In contrast to the traditional teaching method, Mr. Hillyer's goal was to develop well-rounded students, familiar with many aspects of their world. That classical curriculum has always been a key to Calvert School's approach.

Mr. Hillyer believed that presentation and imitation are the first essential steps in education. An example of this concept is evident in how Calvert script is taught to homeschool students. Calvert script is a specific style of writing for Calvert School students, where they learn cursive lowercase letters and manuscript uppercase letters. Children are taught one letter at a time. Soon after a letter is introduced, short words using that letter are shown and the child is asked to imitate. Next, the child imitates a sentence using the letters he has learned so far. Before long, children are successfully writing words contained in a sentence or paragraph dictated by their teacher. This method, which is still taught in the Day School classroom, proves successful each year to thousands of children, including some with physical disabilities, and it remains a distinctive way to identify students schooled by Calvert.

Mr. Hillyer believed that comprehension followed imitation; that in time children form habits with imitation; that children in time develop an understanding of the material. He made a game of repetition and he invented devices to enhance drilling, which he thought neither was the beginning nor end of learning, but a tool.

He also believed strongly in the role of the teacher, whom he said must care enough personally to present a portion of himself to his student as a gift. Calvert School's homeschool curriculum gives Virgil Hillyer's gift to countless families in the United States and all over the world as they continue to learn the Calvert way.

Mr. Hillyer was also a prolific author, who penned about eight books and numerous articles on education. One of his best known books is the childhood favorite, *A Child's History of the World*, which takes children through history in a way that is uniquely appropriate and entertaining for them. First printed in 1924, the book remains a staple of the Calvert curriculum and a feature of each Calvert Fourth Grader's course.

