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The First Thanksgiving
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According to historical records about the first Thanksgiving, in November 1621, the Pilgrims invited the Wampanoag Indians to share a three-day feast in celebration of their first harvest in the new world. Massasoit, the Wampanoag chief, brought 90 men to the feast and presented the Pilgrims' governor with five slain deer.

In later years, New Englanders commemorated the first Thanksgiving as part of their regional history but Thanksgiving itself was not a national holiday until Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of "Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book," promoted the holiday during the late 1850s and early 1860s as a way to foster national unity at a time when the country was divided against itself and moving toward Civil War. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln officially declared Thanksgiving to be a national holiday.

Thanksgiving is not a commemoration of a divine event, as Christmas and Easter, and thus is not a religious holiday in the same way as those holidays. Yet, the first Thanksgiving celebrations for good harvests did have a religious meaning for both the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag. And, the celebration of Thanksgiving today still has important implications for thinking about the place of religion in American life.

The Pilgrims considered themselves indebted to their God for a harvest that would enable them to survive the coming winter. After landing on Cape Cod at the outset of the previous winter, starvation had reduced by half their original band of 104. The Pilgrims were also grateful to the Indians who taught them how to plant corn as well as to the Indians whose supplies of corn the Pilgrims uncovered and consumed during their first winter. The Pilgrims viewed these Indians as agents of divine providence.

The Wampanoag also inhabited a

religious world. They thanked the spirits for their own harvests and success in hunting and for surviving diseases that had wiped out most of the Native population in the region before the Pilgrims arrived. The Wampanoag too may have viewed the Pilgrims as agents of the spirits, for good or for ill.

The Thanksgiving feast that these two groups shared did not involve religious consensus, but it did involve spiritual feeling on both sides. In hindsight, the event might be seen as an expression of the religious pluralism that has come to play such an important role in shaping American culture. Indeed, although few Native Americans, understandably, have pleasant associations with Thanksgiving and the Mayflower, the religious pluralism that is associated with the Thanksgiving holiday today is one of its most persistent and positive aspects.