

By April 1910 the American Museum of Natural History showed an interest in his excavations and sent representatives to examine his diggings. The party included Herman C. Bum-pus, director of the museum.

Niven expanded his area of exploration. Over an area of about two thousand square miles in the Valley of Mexico, from Texcoco to Tlalnepantla, Niven examined hundreds of clay pits. Niven confined his excavations to a region of one hundred square miles.

At many sites he found two or three floors or pavements, two to five meters from the surface. On the first floor or pavement was a two- to three-meter deposit of pebbles, sand, and small boulders, covered with a rich soil of the valley, in which he found innumerable fragments of broken pottery and small clay figures, diorite beads, spindle whorls, and so forth. The second rock-hard pavement was from three-fourths to one meter beneath the first. In the intervening space he found not a single piece of pottery or anything to indicate that people had dwelt there.

Underneath this second pavement was a well-defined layer of ashes and charcoal, from three centimeters to one meter thick. Finds beneath this last layer included terra-cotta figurines, human bones and skulls, and cylinder seals.

At another site less than five kilometers distant, Niven found an ancient river bed, in the gravel of which were small figurines in terra-cotta, many of them rounded like pebbles. Dr. Eduard Seler, a noted German archaeologist whose views were widely respected, examined Niven's finds. "This river," said Dr. Seler, on seeing the gravel pit and the small portion of the ruins exposed, "was here long before the lakes of the Valley of Mexico, and if the river is this old, as the indisputable proof of geology plainly tells, then the city it buried beneath all this sand and gravel, must have been hundreds, if not thousands of years older than the capital of Tenochtitlan, which Cortés found when he came here."

Niven continued his excavations and secured annual contracts from farmers in the Valley of Mexico. During a period of more than fifteen years, he rented successively fourteen small farms, averaging about half an acre each, and dug trenches ten to fifteen feet deep all over the ground, employing the Indian owners, usually two or three of them, to do the work. More than one hundred thousand tons of earth were removed; unique artifacts went to the National Museum in Mexico City.