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In re Words: Use of ‘Uncharted’ Is off the Charts

By Juliette Gillespie

Allow me to introduce you to one of my newest pet peeves. I encountered the following sentences during my work as an editor here at the Law Journal:

- Our team has worked tirelessly to support clients through these uncharted waters.
- There remains uncharted territory in cases that involve bankruptcy, divorce and equitable distribution.
- Without a trial record, the Appellate Division crafted a decision in uncharted waters.

Can you spot the common denominator?

That's right, the cringe-worthy phrase is "unchartered waters," or "unchartered territory," or pretty much "unchartered" anything, because it's almost never the right word.

Try it. Google the word "unchartered." You will receive the helpful-yet-mildly-condescending response: "Did you mean *uncharted*?"

Yes. Yes, they did. The authors of the above sentences meant "uncharted."

When something is "uncharted," it does not appear on a map. It has not been discovered, explored, investigated, surveyed and recorded or plotted on a chart.

We all know that a chart is "a sheet exhibiting information in tabular form," or "a graphic representation." A sea-chart is a map used by navigators that delineates the ocean and coastline. And voilà—the phrase "uncharted waters." Similarly, uncharted territory is land that has not yet been mapped.

Thus, waters and land can be literally "uncharted"—they are not on a map—but now we use the phrase figuratively, to indicate the new and unknown, a situation that is unfamiliar or never encountered before. Uncharted.

So, the phrase *unchartered waters* is incorrect, even if this mistake has popped up since the 1800s (according to dictionary.com).

The word *uncharted* was first recorded in English around 1840–50. It's based on the word *chart*, which derives from the French *charte*, and ultimately from Latin (*charta* or *carta*). In modern-day French, one of the words for map is "carte."

In French, "carte" also means menu, which explains why when you order items individually off the menu, you are ordering "à la carte." But let's stick to English for now.

Turning our attention back to "charter," a charter is a grant written by a legislative or sovereign power, by which a body (such as a company, school, town or colony) is founded and its rights and privileges defined. "The institution was chartered in 1902."

We've all heard of charter schools, for example. They operate under a grant from the Commissioner of Education. These are tuition-free public schools, but they are not overseen by the local district's board of education. Instead they are governed by an independent board of trustees, under a charter.

So, "unchartered" *is* a word, but it is not used with "water" or "territory." It means "not having a charter or written constitution" or "without regulation; lawless." For example, the late 19th century American frontier was unchartered land (to the European settlers/invaders), leading to the whole "Wild West" situation. Criminality, disorder and lawlessness reigned—until they were reined in. (Hint: The subject of my next column?)

A charter, of course, can also be the reservation of an aircraft, boat or bus for private use. One might charter a vessel for a fishing expedition (but don't go into uncharted waters!), or a luxury coach to tour a foreign city. A group might charter a plane to fly to Paris.

Yes, I'm back to France again. All this talk about the word "charter" makes me think of Chartres Cathedral. No, it's not pronounced "charters." Try to say it with a soft "sh" sound and a French accent.

It's a towering, Gothic cathedral, with flying buttresses and intricate stained glass windows, located in the town of—you guessed it—Chartres, about 80 km southwest of Paris. It is said to be one of the most authentic and complete works of religious architecture of the early 13th century. I've been there, and it *is* magnificent.

It is also known as the Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres, or, in French, *Notre Dame de Chartres*. For the love of all that is holy, please do not pronounce it like the university in Indiana. You can imagine how I feel about that.

And speaking of football (a rare occasion for me) why is Favre—which always struck me as a French name—pronounced "farv"? I'm referring, of course, to the great Green Bay Packers quarterback, Brett Favre. He himself does not know how this phonetic abomination originated.

“I asked my dad. He has no idea,” Favre said. “Where I grew up [Mississippi], there weren’t a lot of Favres, but there were some. Some spelled it Favre, others Farve. I don’t know. Somewhere along the line, someone probably was on a little moonshine and wrote it down wrong.” *The Baltimore Sun*, March 24, 2002.

I like that explanation, and I believe the apéritif-sipping French would understand.

But, once again, I have veered wildly off course—into uncharted rhetorical, metaphorical waters. To circle back and wrap it up ... if you ever find yourself in France, I do recommend visiting Chartres Cathedral. It is in well-charted territory, so you can hop on a tour bus to get there—a charter to Chartres. Bon voyage! ■

Juliette Gillespie is Law Editor at the New Jersey Law Journal, where she is responsible for contributed content and special sections. Contact her at jgillespie@alm.com. On Twitter: @JGillespieNJLJ